

## **Bleak Outlook for Sexual Minorities in Kyrgyzstan**

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Activists report rising trend of homophobic abuse amid widespread intolerance.

For the last year, Azamat has avoided walking alone on deserted streets after dark. The 24-year-old Bishkek resident is still traumatised by what happened when he arranged to meet someone he encountered on a gay dating website.

His date turned out to be an undercover policeman. After they exchanged a few words at the discreet location where they had arranged to meet, other officers turned up and Azamat (not his real name) was seized and taken to a police station, where he underwent a horrific ordeal.

“They told me that I wasn’t a human being and people like me needed to be annihilated because we were ruining the nation,” he said. “They beat me, burned me with cigarette ends, and raped me with a bottle.”

Azamat said he was in so much pain that he just wanted to die. Under duress, he gave the officers his real name as well as the phone numbers of other gay men he knew.

The police officers finally released him after he gave them a bribe equivalent to 150 US dollars and promised not to tell anyone.

It took Azamat several months to recover physically, during which time he stopped seeing his gay friends. Given his traumatic experience, he said he did not want to file a complaint.

“The courts, the prosecution service and policemen cover up for each other,” he said, adding that he told his parents that he had been detained for fighting in the street.

This was the second time Azamat had been detained by police for his sexuality. When he was 20, he was similarly lured into a meeting with an undercover policeman. On that occasion, however, he was released after paying a 60-dollar bribe.

Azamat’s experience as a target for extortion and violence is all too familiar to many in Kyrgyzstan’s LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) community.

Although homosexual acts were decriminalised in 1998, rights activists have told IWPR that LGBT people are extremely vulnerable to abuse. Not only are they often targeted by law enforcement bodies, but they also face isolation from their families and the wider community after they come out. (See **Homophobia Endemic in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan** for a previous report on these issues.)

A January 2014 **report** by the New York-based Human Rights Watch recorded extensive homophobic abuse by Kyrgyz police.

Researchers spoke to 40 gay and bisexual men in four regions of Kyrgyzstan who had been subjected to physical, sexual, and psychological violence as well as arbitrary detention. Sums of up to 12,000 dollars had been extorted from them by threats of violence or of exposing their sexual orientation to friends and family.

Anna Kirey, an LGBT rights researcher with Human Rights Watch, said that only two of the 40 men interviewed had been brave enough to file a police report.

“If other victims of [police] torture are more open and are willing to lodge a complaint telling who they are, for gays and bisexuals it is different. Both cases did not reach the court due to lack of evidence,” she said.

Human Rights Watch called on the government to condemn and thoroughly investigate reports of abuse and establish a confidential complaints mechanism for all cases of police abuse.

Kirey noted that threatening to expose someone’s sexuality was a powerful weapon.

“They could be thrown out of their families; sacked from their job; if their friends find out, they will start avoiding them,” she said.

Danik Kasmamytov took part in the presentation of the Human Rights Watch in Kyrgyzstan, and was subsequently subjected to intimidation including a death threat. He is one of the few men to have publicly come out in Kyrgyzstan. His parents did not take it well when five years ago, when he was 18, he told them he was gay.

For six months, his parents tried to “cure” him. His mother took him to a psychologist, booked an appointment with a psychiatrist and even dragged him along to see a healer.

Despite this, Kasmamytov feels sorry for his parents because of the public scorn they risk.

## **WIDESPREAD INTOLERANCE**

Gay men are portrayed in a negative light by both the local, Kyrgyz-language media, which tends to reflect conservative values, and the widely available Russian media, which mirrors Moscow’s anti-gay stance.

Last year, the Russian parliament adopted a law imposing heavy fines for providing information about homosexuality to people under 18.

On March 12 this year, Torobay Zulpukarov, deputy speaker of the Kyrgyz parliament, said parliamentarians were working on a similar bill. He made his announcement at a meeting of a youth group whose members protested against “gay propaganda” supposedly spread by civil society groups.

Gulnara Ibraeva, a sociology lecturer at the American University in Central Asia, explained that negative public attitudes make it hard for parents to accept their children being gay.

“They are trying to protect themselves against the pressure from society,” Ibraeva said.

The revival of Islam in Kyrgyzstan over the last decade or so, combined with recent moves toward anti-gay legislation in Russia, has further impacted on the LGBT community.

The majority of people follow moderate forms of Sunni Islam, but more fundamentalist Islamic teachings have also been popularised by foreign missionaries or by people who have studied at religious schools abroad.

Two years ago, the Muftiate – the official body in charge of Islam in Kyrgyzstan – mounted a campaign to stop a film telling the story of Moroccan men exploring their religious and sexual identities from being screened at a human rights film festival in Bishkek.

Following the publication of the Human Rights Watch report, the Muftiate issued a fatwa against gay people. Although rights activists protested that this amounted to a death threat, Muftiate spokesman Asan Saipov told IWPR that his organisation opposed violence towards sexual minorities.

He argued that the fatwa was merely intended to express concern that the authorities were allowing foreign organisations to make statements that “contradict the mentality of Kyrgyz people and local traditions”.

## **ATTITUDES CHANGING FOR THE WORSE**

The collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s seemed to herald an era of greater rights for LGBT people.

Vladimir Tyupin, the head of Bishkek-based NGO Oasis, said that society seemed more tolerant 20 years ago, when he was one of a small group of gay people who came out and set up the organisation he now runs.

“It was in 1993 that I got involved with the gay community in Bishkek,” he said, adding that he was surprised to see that he was not alone.

He recalled how he used to walk to work wearing high heels and bright red lipstick without experiencing any kind of abuse, and how he and his friends organised gay discos, even in the more conservative southern parts of the country.

“In the past, the LGBT community was something intriguing for the public in Kyrgyzstan. Now this interest has been transformed into hatred,” Tyupin said.

Alex Mamytov, a representative of the group Bishkek Feminist Collective SQ, which works to protect the rights of sexual minorities, said that NGOs working to protect sexual minorities could claim some successes. They frequently organise awareness actions and stage cultural events, and two gay clubs operate openly in Bishkek.

Health ministry officials had become more responsive to the needs of the LGBT community, and the country’s new human rights ombudsman Bakyt Amanbaev has agreed to include information about the rights of sexual minorities as a separate chapter in his next annual report.

But activists say these achievements are being steadily undermined by a rising current of homophobia.

They cite two separate incidents, in 2006 and 2008, when international conferences held by the Labris

group, another NGO that defends sexual minorities, were disrupted by police raids.

In 2011, the justice ministry refused to register Pathfinder, an NGO seeking to support gays and lesbians. The ministry said its full title “erodes the moral standards and national traditions of Kyrgyzstan’s people”. The NGO subsequently registered, still as Pathfinder but with no reference in its title to gay and lesbian people.

Erkin Alymbekov, the head of the parliamentary committee for human rights at the time of this interview – he has since left that post – disputed the idea that sexual minorities needed special legislative protections.

“Parliament is not ready to debate the problems of the LGBT community. We have enough other important and pressing issues to discuss,” he told IWPR. “Let the West deal with that. They [Western countries] raise their problems and defend them, probably because they have nothing else to do since they’ve solved all the other problems.”

## **POLICE REMAIN BIASED**

Rights groups offer training courses for police officers on why violence based on to sexual orientation is unacceptable. But activists acknowledge that these are not very effective.

“Unfortunately, our efforts are futile,” said Mamytov. “This isn’t because we activists lack experience or professionalism, but because the voices calling for hatred and segregation and urging people to follow Islamic rules and national traditions are getting louder.”

Mamytov added that as soon as prosecutors, judges or police officers discover the sexual orientation of the victim, they refuse to investigate further, or throw out the case on a technicality.

Veronika Yuryeva, legal programmes coordinator with Labris, another NGO protecting sexual minorities, agreed. She said she and her colleagues saw little interest on the part of the interior ministry in addressing police abuses against LGBT people.

Interior ministry spokesman Jorobay Abdraimov dismissed allegations that police were responsible for torture and violence. He insisted that there was a proper procedure for handling such complaints, and that any allegations about police officers were thoroughly investigated.

“All reports are handled in strict confidence and if there are doubts about objectivity, they [victims] should write to the higher-up departments or to the ministry itself,” he said. “Let them name any individual or a police station where violence has taken place, and we will launch an investigation.”

Azamat, who suffered abuse at the hands of the police, is pessimistic about his future as a gay man in Kyrgyzstan. He is thinking of emigrating permanently to the United States or Germany.

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