

Gay Rights Violated in Kazakhstan

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Homosexuals in Kazakhstan are facing widespread intimidation and discrimination

In the first week of May, four homosexuals were beaten up outside an Almaty gay club. Police arriving at the scene did nothing to stop the fighting. Instead, they joined the attackers. The incident is anything but unique. Beatings of gay men are as commonplace in Kazakhstan as police intervention or protection is non-existent.

"I was battered, but I cannot take the attackers to court - I am an outcast and a pervert as far as the police are concerned," complained Andrei, who is bisexual.

Homosexuality was a crime under Soviet rule but, with the fall of communism, attitudes grew slightly more tolerant towards homosexuality and alternative sexual practices. Gay and lesbian communities began to grow in Kazakhstan, as their one-time hangouts were transformed into restaurants, bars and nightclubs.

It took until 1997 for Clause 308 of Kazakhstan's Criminal Code banning homosexuality to be overturned, although the law continued to proscribe the activities of gay people.

An oversight perhaps, but one nonetheless reflecting the majority's hostile attitude towards homosexuals.

Public opinion was outraged by the notion of bisexuality and cross-dressing. Despite wider coverage of gay and lesbian issues by the Western and domestic media and the advance of gay rights in Europe, tolerance among ordinary Kazaks remains generally low.

Only in pockets can more enlightened attitudes be found, usually among the young and better educated.

"To be honest, I don't care if someone wants to sleep with a person of the same gender as long as it doesn't mess with my own life," said Artiom Korabliov, a high school student.

"I don't see any major harm in homosexuality," commented Anna Pirogova, also a student. "At least they don't steal or kill."

Gay convicts get no sympathy, despite suffering brutal treatment from fellow inmates in Kazakhstan's prisons. They are routinely raped and sexually exploited, ignored and insulted.

The abuse and violence has led many to commit suicide. Kazak social scientist Dmitri Avilkin has suggested separating such inmates. But for many people, simply being homosexual is reason enough to be jailed.

The country's major religions offer no blueprint for tolerance of different sexualities. Muslim and Orthodox leaders are unanimous in their opposition to homosexuality, considered one of the gravest sins in both religions.

Both faiths stick doggedly to their conviction that religion can reform a gay person and return him or her to 'normal' heterosexuality.

Kazak physiologist Rishad Mirbekov disagrees. "No god, and no manner of threats or physical violence can change such a person," maintained Mirbekov. "We could call these people hostages of their own physiology. They are slaves to their needs."

Such a view may well be hotly disputed by Western gay rights campaigners, but Kazak homosexuals have no one to effectively champion their rights.

The Human Rights Association for People with Alternative Sexual Preferences was set up in the wake of communism's collapse but its efforts have been limited and largely unsuccessful because of hostility from the authorities and the general public.

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