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Is tolerance towards homosexuality a purely Western issue? – Why not “look east” in this case, too?

By **Harrie Esterhuyse**

Research Analyst, Centre for Chinese Studies

Gay rights have lately received much media coverage. In the United States, President Obama became the first sitting US president to give his public support for gay marriage. The US and United Kingdom have also in recent months begun to stop government funding to countries that have anti-gay legislation, leaving some African state budgets, such as Malawi's, in shambles. In many countries such as the Netherlands, Canada, Portugal, Argentina and South Africa full marriage rights have been extended to same sex couples. In many other countries such as the UK, Germany, some US states and Austria, same-sex couples are able to enter into civil unions. Thus the pro-gay movement is increasing in strength around the world: except, it seems, for wider Africa. Is this the smartest move for the developing economies of Africa? Maybe learning from China in this case is not too bad an idea?

China, just like Africa, suffered under colonialism in the era of European expansion. After British colonialism introduced legislation to Hong Kong that illegalized homosexual intercourse, these laws were scrapped in 1991. In mainland China, homosexuality was still seen as a crime and a psychological condition in the 1990's, even after the World Health Organization declared it to not be a mental disorder in 1990. However, the so called “hooligan” law that criminalised homosexuality was repealed in 1997 and homosexuality was taken of the list of mental disorders in 2001 by the Chinese government, removing legal obstacles to homosexual Chinese from living their lives openly.

Still, the family pressure to get married in modern China is so strong that gay and lesbian Chinese at times marry each other, relieving the social pressure from their families to find a marriage partner. If people, however, at the surface fit in with the expectations of society, their sexual preferences are not relevant, and they can lead the lives they choose. Tolerance – or indifference – towards homosexuality has a long history in China. All men and women are thought to have aspects of both yin and yang, feminine and masculine. Homosexuality was not on the list of prohibited practices of Confucianism. Rather, Confucianism emphasised doing one's duty, which - in those days - included having children. Other sexual choices were left to individual preference. Amongst the Chinese emperors, it was not an uncommon practice to have male concubines.

The current Chinese government for their part wants productive citizens that do not cause instability, but goes about with their lives, growing the Chinese economy and not upsetting the status quo. As homosexuality does not threaten the Chinese state, it is a non-issue for the central government. China does not have a dominant church or religion with rigid interpretations of script. This makes it easier for the government to pragmatically focus purely on the economy and political stability. The Chinese government have realised that accepting – even if not condoning – gay rights benefits the state economically and politically. Homosexuality, ironically, even works along with some of the national policies: unintentionally in line with China's population control, homosexual couples are less likely to have children.



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The “it is un-African” myth


African states in contrast to China are notorious for being homophobic, with only South Africa recognising gay rights and same-sex marriage. Homosexuality is often called “un-African”, in spite of anti-gay legislation being a colonial import, just as it had been in China. South Africa abandoned the anti-homosexual legislation that it had inherited from the racist Apartheid regime. South Africa adopted sexual equality, because South Africa’s reformers viewed sexual discrimination as much a human rights abuse as racial discrimination. Archbishop Desmond Tutu famously declared that he had not engaged in the struggle against oppression based on race, just to oppress people for other reasons afterwards.

Africa’s most southern country thus adopted a pro-gay stance long before many western countries, not because of western pressure but because of its own experience with colonial oppression.

Most African governments do not share South Africa’s stance on human rights. In Uganda an act has been repeatedly presented to parliament, which would see homosexuality becoming a capital offence. Malawi, Nigeria, Liberia, Zimbabwe and Senegal all have anti-gay legislation. Cameroon was in the news lately for imprisoning seven men under the law for “sexual relations with a person of the same sex”. And even in South Africa, social (though not legal) homophobia has given rise to crimes, such as so called “corrective” rape of lesbian women to “make” them heterosexual. The legal aspect is therefore a part of the bigger picture; the actual implementation and maintenance of freedom of sexual orientation also needs political will.

Ban Ki-moon, Secretary General of the United Nations, has criticised African states for treating their gay populations like “second class citizens or even criminals”. The situation in Africa sees governments prosecuting citizens, who do nothing to threaten the stability or wellbeing of the state and its structures. Transparency and democratic values are trampled in an attempt to sentence people for committing acts that are very hard to legally prove. All of these processes distract valuable resources, both financial and social, which could have been used for more relevant projects.

Reconciling economy, state and human rights

Instead of prosecuting its citizens, African countries should look at China, the largest, and economically arguably the most successful developing country of all, and make the logical economical and governance sum. African governments should look at the economic potential of all its populations, including gays and lesbians. Allow gay people to live their lives peacefully, to focus on their work, increasing both GDP and the tax base without being harassed. China is criticised for making calculated economic choices often above human rights. But in this case, China has channelled a course that is both economically beneficial and pro-human rights, a win-win scenario, so to say. Allowing if not necessarily condoning gay lifestyles is positive with regard to economic growth, stability and international standing. If a citizen is not a problem, do not make him (or her) a problem. Beyond any moral consideration: accepting homosexual rights makes pure economic sense. 

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Rio+20: What's the point?

By **Meryl Burgess**

Research Analyst, Centre for Chinese Studies

The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), also known as the Earth Summit in 1992 was meant to create positive impacts for the future. When the first Rio conference on environmental sustainability took place in 1992, issues such as environmental sustainability, and global development without excessive environmental harm, let alone establishing treaties on climate change, desertification and biodiversity were not on my mind. I had just turned 5 years old, with few cares for anything but Barbie dolls and ice-cream. I had no idea what was taking place in the world at that time. Did this big event change something to the positive?

Big issues at mega events

Today, 'mega events' (as they are now referred to) such as world summits have become more numerous year in-year out. And certainly, anyone with an inkling at modern current affairs knows that China has been the world's fastest growing economy for quite a while, so we can move beyond the basic level of discussing these events. A tremendous amount of development, including industrialisation and urbanisation has taken place in China, with concurrent damaging effects on the country's ecosystems. What might be less in focus is that China and parts of Africa are home to some of the world's richest and most biologically diverse areas. China is known as one of the seventeen mega-diverse countries in the world, moreover, the continent of Africa has some of the most famous biodiversity hotspots in the world. The problem remains that this biodiversity is under (human) siege.

Among Africa's primary needs are development and poverty alleviation. This will increase the use of natural resources, for instance via more extensive agriculture, as the sector is feeding the growing population and is creating employment opportunities in China and in Africa. This is the difficult challenge for China and Africa, also seen in other developing parts of the world: the need for development versus the need to conserve already depleting natural resources. In order to develop, developing countries need their economies to grow, likewise to lift their populations out of poverty, they need that growth to create jobs for their people. But what role for protection of natural resources? We've seen problems with such single minded development in the past industrialisation period among the so-called developed nations: the more industrialisation occurs, the more the environment is harmed. Biodiversity that is lost is just gone – and no attempts at recoup or repair after reaching higher levels of development can restore it. China is a good (or rather, bad) example for this practice once again.

The more the environment is harmed and biodiversity lost, the fewer natural resources are left to help us feed each other, or simply breathe clean air and maintain our health. Let us not forget the effects of climate change on our environment and the need to develop – actually a much less urgent issue 20 years ago. So what exactly is the point of world summits like Rio+20 when it appears as if things have gotten worse since that first conference?



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