

Why LGBT hatred suddenly spiked in Indonesia

Sunday 16 April 2017, by [BEVINS Vincent](#), [LAMB Kate](#) (Date first published: 22 February 2017).

While other Asian countries make progress on LGBT rights, an unexpected wave of bigotry and anger broke out in Indonesia last year.

A few nights ago Sudarsa received a text message from his ex-boyfriend Hendro. "I can't sleep because I'm missing you," it read.

The pair had been together for seven years. But two years ago Hendro, struggling to be open about his sexuality, succumbed to family pressure and married a woman.

"80% of gay men in Indonesia have the same problem. They get married for status, because of family and social pressure," explains Sudarsa, 30, a hairdresser who works in the Indonesian capital, Jakarta, and who asked to use his first name only.

"That's why they marry a girl from the village," he adds, "A girl who doesn't understand about gay life."

In the predominately Muslim nation of Indonesia, being gay is something seldom admitted outside tight-knit social circles, and in country where marriage and procreation is paramount there is only so long that some can keep family pressure at bay.

In the past, vitriol against LGBT occasionally flared up and died down soon enough, a one-off flash in the pan – an Islamic group up in arms about a transgender pageant, or queer film festival, a gay couple arrested and abused by police. And then all of a sudden in 2016, an unprecedented tide of vitriol and violence was unleashed against sexual and gender minorities across the country. Following a series of discriminatory comments from government ministers and officials, reinforced by medical professionals and Islamic clerics, moral panic and paranoia around LGBT set in.

The sustained backlash started early in the year. In response to a brochure stating that LGBT should be barred from the University of Indonesia campus, the minister, Muhammad Nasir, noted: "There are standards of values and morals to uphold. A university is a moral safeguard."

Things spiralled. At a seminar on maternal health one local mayor suggested mothers should avoid feeding their children instant noodles, a staple in Indonesia, because their time should instead be spent on nutritious cooking and teaching their children how not to be gay.

Now the [LGBT] community is demanding more freedom, it really is a threat ... it's dangerous
Ryamizard Ryacudu

The country's top Muslim clerical body, the Council of Indonesian Ulema (MUI) issued a fatwa condemning homosexuality, while the broadcasting commission urged television stations to refrain from showing effeminate men.

Then government minister Yuddy Chrisnandi, stated: "Of course it is inappropriate for civil servants to be [homosexual]," he said, "Having more than one wife for a man is still normal...but LGBT is another issue."

Comment after comment kept the national hysteria rolling, like kerosene on a fire.

The National Psychiatric Association announced LGBT a "mental disorder" while the child protection commission observed that LGBT "propaganda" could "brainwash" children into developing "deviant" sexualities.

The minister of defence, Ryamizard Ryacudu, likened the LGBT movement to a proxy war, one more dangerous than the threat of nuclear warfare. "It's dangerous as we can't see who our foes are; out of the blue everyone is brainwashed. Now the [LGBT] community is demanding more freedom, it really is a threat. In a proxy war, another state might occupy the minds of the nation without anyone realising it. In a nuclear war, if a bomb is dropped over Jakarta, Semarang [another town in Java] will not be affected; but in a proxy war, everything we know could disappear in an instant - it's dangerous."

"We thought at the time they were just trying to distract from corruption, but we were wrong. It kept rolling and getting bigger," explains activist Yulita Rustinawati, from the LGBT advocacy organisation, Arus Pelangi.

The impact was higher incidents of violence. Houses were raided, LGBT people were evicted
Yulita Rustinawati

"The impact was of course, higher incidents of violence," she continues, "Houses were raided, LGBT people were evicted, and it happened with legitimisation from ministers, mayors and government officials who were making the comments."

Each inflammatory comment made the news, and was subsequently picked up by hardline religious groups, who started profiling, intimidating and attacking LGBT individuals in their communities, sometimes with the tacit approval of local officials.

"It was crazy," says Rustinawati, "Even activists were profiled. In Yogyakarta one LGBT activist I know slept in a different house every night because they were afraid."

University lecturer Achmad (who prefers not to use his real name) watched it unfold with horror, as his colleagues were asked to obscure queer content taught on campus, as a gay couple he knew was forced out of their home by police, as fear rippled through his social group - and as his conservative family pushed him harder to get married.

"I'm already thirty and not married and then with all the LGBT issues all over the media, they watched it and the pressure was worse," he says, "They were very chill before, but after those issues last year, they kept pushing me."

Achmad has never once in his life bought a girlfriend home, nor ever had one. The way it works in his family, he says, is basically "don't ask, don't tell". Even if they strongly suspect he is gay, it is never acknowledged or discussed.

In the public sphere, that is largely how it functions too. Few public figures are "out" and when the vitriol was unleashed last year it was the voices of religious conservatives, of moral panic, that were heard the loudest.

The momentum of the backlash has since subsided, although incidents of violence, intimidation, evictions, and in some cases collusion between police and hardline Islamists to target LGBT people, has not stopped. At Arus Pelangi, about 10 reports of such cases come in each month.

Reflecting on the events a year on, Kyle Knight, a researcher on the LGBT program at Human Rights Watch, said the crisis that unfolded in Indonesia last year “looked a bit like a natural disaster”.

“If you are going to make that allegory, the disaster risk-reduction measures that you would use for villages and roads, anti-flooding or whatever, in this case would be legal provisions and inclusions,” he noted.

The absence of say, an LGBT non-discrimination law, for example, meant President Joko Widodo had little to point to in defence. He did eventually speak out, saying that no one should face discrimination, but it was not until more than six months later when the hate had already died down.

The fear was deeper this time around in part because it was driven by high-level government officials
Kyle Knight

While anti-LGBT sentiment is not new in Indonesia – Islamic hardliners have long targeted the community, sometimes with impunity – the backlash took on new colours and allegiances last year.

“The fear was deeper this time around in part because it was driven by high-level government officials, coming down from people in official positions of power,” says Knight. “This bedrock of a government that remains somewhat neutral on this issues was gone, was completely ripped out from underneath them.”

Regionally, the lack of legal support for sexual and gender minorities in Indonesia runs counter to current trends.

At the same time that Indonesia’s psychiatric association was labeling LGBT a mental disorder, other mental health bodies in Asia, including the Philippines, Thailand and China, have been removing homosexuality as a diagnosis, and taking the extra step of issuing LGBT non-discrimination statements.

In 2013, Vietnam lifted its ban on gay marriage and Taiwan is on the verge of legalising it.

“It’s is not as though Indonesia was backsliding against some distant, foreign western thing,” says Knight of the LGBT backlash. “But it was actually against trends in the region to be more open and more inclusive of this population.”

In Jakarta some, including 32-year-old doctor Dewi (not her real name) says she doesn’t expect Indonesia will change its attitude toward LGBT anytime soon. One of Dewi’s lesbian friends is engaged in a marriage of convenience with a gay man, while another friend is seriously considering the same path. Yet another lesbian friend is about to marry a man to live up to family expectations.

A medical doctor who recently opened her own clinic, Dewi said she didn’t have the confidence to come out to her family until she felt she had enough professional achievements under her belt. Before that, she says, they would likely see her as “gay and useless”, even though she was already a doctor.

“Some in the Indonesian LGBT population are fighting for their rights,” she says, “It’s not ideal, but some of us actually say, the more we fight, the more resistance there will be, there more attacks

there will be.”

Kate Lamb in Jakarta

* The Guardian. Wednesday 22 February 2017 11.36 GMT Last modified on Thursday 6 April 2017 15.41 BST:

<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2017/feb/22/why-lgbt-hatred-suddenly-spiked-in-indonesia>

Indonesia: gay men facing 100 lashes for having sex

Case could become the first time Aceh's sharia law has been enforced against homosexuality.

Two gay Indonesian men have been arrested and face 100 lashes in a case that is drawing international attention to the enforcement of controversial new Islamic bylaws in the semi-autonomous Aceh province.

Mobile phone footage, showing vigilantes slapping one of the young men as he sits naked on the ground awaiting arrest by local sharia police, has been shared on social media in the world's largest Muslim-majority country.

Human Rights Watch has demanded their immediate release, saying their possible punishment – a public beating with a stick – constitutes torture.

The sentence has already been meted out for crimes such as adultery, but it is believed this would be the first time Aceh's new statutes concerning religion and morality could be enforced against homosexuality.

Aceh is the only region in Indonesia, a plural democracy, which allows local authorities to maintain parallel laws and police forces based on religious interpretations.

The province, sitting on the northern tip of Sumatra island and holding about 2% of Indonesia's population of 250 million, was granted this special status in 2001 as a compromise with historical separatist movements.

The anti-gay law was passed in 2014 and Human Rights Watch says these new statutes and punishments violate human rights treaties to which Indonesia is a party, and has asked president Joko "Jokowi" Widodo to intervene.

"The agreement which granted Aceh the legitimate right to form its own local bylaws did not allow them to persecute people for their religion or sexuality," said Andreas Harsono, a researcher with Human Rights Watch in Indonesia. "Across Indonesia today, we are seeing rising discrimination in the name of Islam, including against women and LGBT community"

In October, the moderate Jokowi spoke out against increased abuse directed at LGBT persons in Indonesia, and said police must act to defend them.

“However, Jokowi has not backed up that statement with action,” said a statement issued by Human Rights Watch on 9 April.

The two men, reportedly aged 20 and 24, were caught on 28 March by unknown men who forcibly entered a home. Local bylaws allow this kind of citizen’s arrest and the men are now being held by sharia police.

In the video, one of the men appears distressed and confused. “Brother, please, help me, help me. We are caught.” he says into a mobile phone.

Vincent Bevins in Badung, Indonesia

* The Guardian. Tuesday 11 April 2017 07.09 BST Last modified on Tuesday 11 April 2017 07.10 BST:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/11/indonesia-gay-men-facing-100-lashes-for-having-sex>

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* From 20-25 February the Guardian Global Development Professionals Network is highlighting the work of the LGBT rights activists throughout the world with our LGBT change series. Nominate LGBT heroes here, join the conversation at #LGBTChange and email globaldevpros@theguardian.com to pitch an idea.

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