

Malaysian LGBT+ activist accuses authorities of intimidation

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KUALA LUMPUR: A leading Malaysian LGBT+ activist on Monday accused authorities of intimidation after a statement he read to the UN Human Rights Council led to him being questioned by police.

Numan Afifi, an openly gay Muslim man and prominent advocate, travelled to Geneva last month to read out a statement from a coalition of LGBT+ groups to the Council for its Universal Periodic Review of Malaysia.

The 27-year-old was questioned by police for an hour in Kuala Lumpur on Friday after an online backlash against statements given at the Council, which reviews the human rights record of each United Nations member state every five years.

"It was typical by the police," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. "They tend to intimidate human rights defenders - we've seen that with organisers of other causes too."

"This is a pattern by authorities ... it is their tactics," said Afifi, president of the Pelangi Campaign group, which seeks to raise awareness and advocate for LGBT+ rights in the Southeast Asian nation.

"I will keep speaking out because this is about our lives in this country - we need to speak out against discrimination."

The Kuala Lumpur police headquarters were unable to give an immediate comment.

In the statement he read to the UN, Afifi complimented the Malaysian government for backing recommendations on combating bullying in schools, a move LGBT+ campaigners believe could help protect the community.

But he expressed concern that it had not backed other anti-sexual discrimination recommendations that emerged from the review.

He also criticised government rhetoric over LGBT+ people's involvement in a march to celebrate International Women's Day.

Malaysia's minister in charge of religious affairs decried the presence of LGBT+ groups at the march, calling it "a misuse of democratic space".

'Common ground'

The minister's statement came amid concerns over growing persecution of the LGBT+ community in the Muslim-majority country, where sodomy and other same-sex acts are outlawed.

In August, government officials ordered the removal of portraits of two LGBT+ activists from an art

exhibition and a transgender woman was attacked, sparking public outrage.

One month later, two lesbians were caned for “attempting lesbian sex” in Terengganu, a conservative state in Malaysia’s east.

Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad denounced the punishment but said Malaysia could not accept same-sex marriage or LGBT+ rights.

“There is no engagement between the government – at state or federal level – with our community,” Afifi said. “Whenever they organise a roundtable with civil society organisations, they almost never invite LGBT+ groups ... even where it affects us.”

“By having dialogue and discussions with all stakeholders, we can find common ground to address discrimination.”

Despite the current climate, Afifi said an anti-discrimination law to protect LGBT+ people within the workplace and anti-bullying campaigns in schools were now achievable.

Afifi worked in the communications team of youth and sports minister in 2018 but was forced to step down after just one week after an online and media backlash.

“Because I was in the ministry of youth, they didn’t want me to corrupt the youth – that was the narrative used,” he said.

“I was upset and disappointed. I was one of the first openly gay men to be in a senior position in the government, so to receive this treatment was unfair.”

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