

Cuba: Gay pride parade goes ahead despite official march being banned

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LGBT marches cancelled in Cuba due to 'new tensions'

Organisers of marches for the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia in Cuba have announced that they have been cancelled due to "new tensions."

The Cuban National Center for Sex Education announced yesterday (May 6) that planned marches in Havana and Camagüey will not go ahead.

The statement said the events were being cancelled due to "new tensions in the international and regional context" which they said "directly and indirectly affect our country."

Other planned activities will reportedly still go ahead in Cuba

It also said the country's Ministry of Public Health ordered them to cancel the marches, and said they were acting in line with "the Party, the State and the Revolution.

"We must emphasise that this change in the program of the Days does not imply the suspension of the rest of the activities," the statement continued.

"On the contrary, the decision taken seeks to strengthen and protect everything planned for this edition, which even exceeds the program of last year, with a strong component of academic spaces."
- Cuban National Center for Sex Education

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The International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia is observed on May 17 and aims to raise awareness of LGBT+ rights violations.

The campaign, which is observed across the world, began in 2005, and "transphobia" was added to its title in 2009.

In Cuba, the event is celebrated with huge street parades and marches every year. This year will likely be a more muted affair with two of the biggest events cancelled.

Same-sex marriage has not yet reached Cuba

Last year, Cuban president Miguel Diaz-Canel said he was in favour of legalising same-sex marriage in the country.

Speaking on TV Telesur, he said he was in support of recognising marriage “between people without any restrictions” to help eliminate “any type of discrimination in society”.

The country voted in favour of its new draft constitution just three months ago. The government faced backlash from LGBT+ activists after it caved to pressure from evangelical church groups who expressed their opposition to an amendment which would have allowed same-sex couples to marry.

Meanwhile, Cuba’s relationship with the United States, and with Donald Trump’s administration, appears to be worsening. Despite this, it was reported yesterday by AFP that more than a quarter of a million people visited Cuba from the US in the first four months of 2019.

Michel Bernal, commercial director of Cuba’s tourism ministry, told the news agency: “Despite defamatory campaigns against Cuba, 13.5 percent of tourists that visit us say they chose the island for its safety.”

Patrick Kelleher

• Pink News. 7th May 2019, 6:04 PM

<https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2019/05/07/cuba-lgbt-marches-cancelled/>

Cuba’s gay rights activists take to the streets defiant and proud

Gay pride parade in Cuba’s capital goes ahead despite official march being banned

The annual gay pride parade in Cuba’s capital is usually an upbeat, vivacious conga. Since it was launched in 2007, it has provided a moment for gay and transgender people to celebrate their sexuality, identity and assert their right to exist in public space. But it was altogether different this year. About 100 activists bedecked in rainbow colours marched just four blocks from the heart of Havana’s colonial district towards the Malecón seawall on Saturday before they were corralled and dispersed by police and plain-clothed state security officers.

Still, for Daniel Triana, 21, a gay drama student who had come to the march with family and friends, the march was “a beautiful moment”. “We managed to organise this march ourselves. That’s a massive advance because all the gay rights marches we’ve had up until in Cuba now have been organised by institutions.”

The independent march was organised at the last minute, after the authorities cancelled the official annual gay pride parade, driving a wedge between progressive elements of the communist-ruled state and gay rights activists on the island.

The National Centre for Sex Education, better known as Cenesex, which had been organising the 12th annual “Conga against Homophobia and Transphobia”, issued a statement last Monday saying that “international and regional tensions” meant the parade could not be carried out. A second statement added that outside groups wanted to use the conga as a “weapon” against the Communist

party. And at a meeting with LGBT activists, authorities claimed the event could “be used by foreign forces as the perfect scene for their agenda”, suggesting that Miami-linked conspirators might attack revellers, compelling the police to make arrests and creating negative publicity.

The news left LGBT activists crestfallen and dumbfounded. Some called on the government to provide evidence for claims of potential attacks.

“Ever since the conga started we’ve lived in a hostile context,” said the gay rights activist Marta María Ramírez, 43. “There are police and state security agents to guarantee order for events like this. Are they really saying the police are unable to defend a conga?”

Some activists suspect the government may be trying to keep a lid on rightwing political evangelism, whose rapid ascent on the continent in recent years has helped roll back leftwing governments throughout Latin America.

Last year, Cuba’s evangelical churches united for the first time to campaign against gay marriage, which the Communist party hoped to legalise in the island’s new constitution. The churches’ vigorous campaign – which included petitions, flyposting, and even public demonstrations – rocked the government.

The constitution that Cubans ratified this February had a controversial article that opened the door to gay marriage removed.

“It looks like they have given in to pressures from religious extremists,” said gay ecologist Isbel Díaz Torres, 43. “Cancelling the event is a way of avoiding confrontation but in the end it just makes the situation more complicated.”

Bishop Ricardo Pereira, of the Methodist Church of Cuba, who led unprecedented protests against gay marriage in February, said he was glad the Communist authorities had taken stock of public feeling.

“The government has realised that it’s not only the church against gay marriage – it’s the people,” he said.

Like many churches on the island, the Methodist Church of Cuba receives money that originates from the US state department, which also funnels millions of dollars to dissident groups. The Cuban government argues the ultimate goal of these investments is regime change.

Unlike in most countries where LGBT activism emerges autonomously, the Cuban state – which once sent gay people to labour camps – has led the fight for LGBT rights in recent years. Lesbian and trans groups working with Cenesex came up with the idea of a conga in the early 2000s. Mariela Castro, the centre’s director and former president Raúl Castro’s daughter, pressed for the event at a time when public conversation about gay rights on the island was negligible.

Cenesex has trained dozens of LGBT activists over the last two decades, many of whom now see the centre as too intertwined with the status quo to effect radical change.

“Activist spaces have to be created by activists and not by institutions,” said Díaz Torres.

While some Caribbean island nations still have laws that punish sodomy, Cuba distributes free condoms and lubricants, offers free gender reassignment, and has recently passed laws that punish discrimination for sexual orientation in the workplace with steep fines.

Last week, Cenesex's communiqué tied the decision to cancel the conga event to "heightened aggression against Cuba and Venezuela". Washington slapped sanctions on shipping companies transporting Venezuelan crude to Cuba in April; the most potent US sanctions on Cuba in decades took effect last week; and Donald Trump recently threatened a "full and complete embargo" on the island to punish Cuba for its alliance with Venezuela.

Economics aside, these measures have increased anxiety on the island. Though claims of orchestrated attacks on protesters might sound far-fetched, years of US-backed terrorism, economic strangulation, as well as more recent attempts to create "smart mobs" to stir unrest have contributed to a siege mentality.

While they share the upset, prominent gay rights activists on the island were divided about whether pulling the event was justifiable. "We have to come to terms with the fact it's not going ahead. None of us are happy about it but it's what's been imposed," said the gay blogger Francisco Rodríguez Cruz, who is part of the conga's organisational committee.

"I am confident that nothing or nobody will be able to force us back into the closet," he wrote on his blog.

Cenesex implored activists not to attend the independent event held on Saturday. Some activists said they received calls from state security.

"They've always told us the same thing: there are things we can't talk about or do because it will help the enemy," said Marta María Ramírez. "Meanwhile our lives run past us."

- This article was amended on 13 May 2019. An earlier version referred to Cuba offering free "sex changes". As the Guardian's style guide indicates, the correct term is "gender reassignment".

Ed Augustin in Havana

- The Guardian. Sun 12 May 2019 08.33 BST:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/12/cubas-gay-rights-activists-take-to-the-streets-defiant-and-proud>
