

Ugandan President Says He Will Sign Tough Antigay Measure

By NICHOLAS KULISH FEB. 15, 2014

NAIROBI, Kenya — Gay rights in Africa suffered another setback when President Yoweri Museveni of [Uganda](#) told members of his party on Friday that he would sign a bill imposing harsh sentences for homosexual acts, including life imprisonment in some cases.

President Yoweri Museveni delayed signing a version of the bill last year, saying it was flawed. [Tikisa Negeri/Reuters](#)

The measure would criminalize “the promotion or recognition” of homosexual relations. After a first conviction, offenders face a 14-year prison sentence. Subsequent convictions of “aggravated homosexuality” could bring a penalty of life in prison.

The announcement of the president’s intentions came during a conference of Mr. Museveni’s party, the National Resistance Movement, according to a government spokesman. “The NRM caucus has welcomed the development as a measure to protect Ugandans from social deviants,” said the spokesman, Ofwono Opondo, in a [post on Twitter](#) on Friday.

According to [Amnesty International](#), homosexuality is illegal in 38 of 54 African countries.

Homosexual acts can be punished by death sentences in Mauritania, southern Somalia, Sudan and northern Nigeria, where justice is carried out according to a version of Shariah law. After President Goodluck Jonathan of Nigeria signed a [law](#) criminalizing homosexuality throughout the country last month, arrests of gay people have multiplied amid demands for a crackdown.

Colonial-era Ugandan law already prohibits homosexual acts. An earlier version of the bill, first introduced in 2009 and then withdrawn, included the death penalty in some instances. An international outcry helped scuttle that version, but legislators pushed ahead with a revised one.

The Ugandan Parliament passed the most recent version of the antigay legislation in December. Later that month, Mr. Museveni [wrote a letter](#) to Parliament saying that lawmakers had made procedural errors in passing the bill and that in-depth study was needed before it could be taken up again.

Mr. Museveni said at the time that he would seek further expert opinions.

“The normal person was created to be attracted to the opposite sex in order to procreate and perpetuate the human race,” Mr. Museveni wrote in his December letter about the bill, in which he also said that many women became lesbians out of “sexual starvation” because they had failed to get married.

“This comes after 14 medical experts presented a report that homosexuality is not genetic but a social behavior,” Mr. Opondo said on [Twitter](#).

Reuters reported that the president’s science adviser, Dr. Richard Tushemereirwe, told Mr. Museveni at the conference that “homosexuality has serious public health consequences and should therefore not be tolerated.”

“President Museveni knows that this bill is unconstitutional and that we shall challenge it, after he signs,” said Frank Mugisha, a Ugandan gay rights activist, in an email. He said he did not believe that Mr. Museveni would sign the bill in its current form. “But his political remarks about signing will only increase violence and hatred towards L.G.B.T. persons in Uganda,” he said, using the initials for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender.

Signing the law would be popular with the conservative Ugandan public.

Uganda has a powerful evangelical Christian lobby that has supported antigay legislation. “Ugandan traditionalists, religious leaders & politicians have been urging Museveni to sign the Bill,” Mr. Opondo, the government spokesman, said in another [Twitter post](#).

Gay rights advocates say that American evangelicals have played a crucial role in pushing an antigay agenda in Uganda. In 2012, a Ugandan gay rights group filed a [lawsuit against an American evangelist](#), Scott Lively, in Massachusetts, saying he had incited the persecution of gay men and lesbians in Uganda.

If Mr. Museveni signs the bill into law it is likely to antagonize the socially

liberal Western governments that provide aid to Uganda. “The United States government cannot stand idly by as a witness to history as the Ugandan government prepares to strip lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Ugandans of their human and legal rights,” Ruth W. Messinger, president of the [American Jewish World Service](#), said in a statement, calling the measure a “draconian law, which is nothing less than an act of state-sanctioned hate.”

The New York-based [Center for Constitutional Rights](#) said in a statement that if Mr. Museveni signed the bill, it would “place the lives of countless Ugandans at risk.” The proposed measure “had already intensified the climate of hatred and persecution” against gay men and lesbians in Uganda, the rights group said.

“The international community has a legal and moral obligation to prevent this law from being implemented,” the group said.

But opposition from abroad often only stiffens the resolve of African governments, which oppose what they perceive to be meddling from foreigners, especially former colonial powers. “Hey guys supporting homosexuals take it easy Uganda is a sovereign country,” Mr. Opondo said in a [subsequent message on Twitter](#). The proper course for opponents of the law, he added, is to challenge it in court.

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