

Malaysia accused of 'state-sponsored homophobia' after LGBT crackdown

Tuesday 11 September 2018, by [ELLIS-PETERSEN Hannah](#) (Date first published: 22 August 2018).

Discrimination against community intensifies after politicians ratchet up anti-gay rhetoric to gain votes

In the early hours of Saturday, the police and government officials raided a small nightclub in Kuala Lumpur.

The venue, Blue Boy, was known to be popular with the LGBT community, but for years had been relatively left alone by the authorities. Until the weekend. Twenty men were detained and ordered into counselling for "illicit behaviour" by the Federal Territory Islamic Religious Department of [Malaysia](#) (JAKIM).

Government minister Khalid Samad later released a statement on the motivations behind the raid. "Hopefully this initiative can mitigate the LGBT culture from spreading into our society," he said.

It sent a clear signal to the LGBT community. Thilaga Sulathireh, co-founder of trans rights group Justice For Sisters, says: "We are under attack in an unprecedented way."

Just two days before the raid, a trans woman was brutally beaten on the street in Seremban while seven others watched. The attack left her with broken ribs, a broken backbone and a ruptured spleen.

In the same week, a sharia court ordered a lesbian couple to be caned after they were caught having sex in a car, the first time in years such a punishment had been handed out in Malaysia. The judge said it was "a lesson and reminder to not just the two of you, but the members of society".

The general election in May has been celebrated for ushering in a new era, but the new government's first 100 days in power have been marked by increased discrimination, harassment and violent hate crime against the LGBT community.



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LGBT rights group the Pelangi group marches in Kuala Lumpur. Photograph: Pelangi group facebook page

Homosexuality is illegal in Malaysia, a Muslim-majority country, and there is no anti-discrimination law encompassing sexual orientation and gender identity.

Thilaga says what she described as “state-sponsored homophobia and transphobia” has heightened the climate of fear and resulted in increased discrimination over the past three months.

“We are also seeing a lot of shrinking spaces for LGBT people – offline, online, everywhere,” says Thilaga. “This level of aggression is new and the situation is becoming really alarming. We are hearing a lot of cases of people in the community feeling depressed and suicidal and not feeling safe using public facilities or even going out in public spaces.”

The previous government led by Najib Razak was vocally homophobic and used sodomy laws to slander and lock up political opponent Anwar Ibrahim for almost a decade. Now in opposition, politicians including those associated with the Islamic party PAS, have amped up anti-LGBT rhetoric further.



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Nisha Ayub was one of two LGBT activists who had her portrait removed from an exhibition on the order of the Malaysian government, with campaigners labelling it an attack on the ‘dignity’ of the homosexual community. Photograph: Manan Vatsyayana/AFP/Getty Images

It is a tactic aimed at gaining popularity and putting the new government in a difficult political position, forcing them to clarify their stance on an issue seen as a poisoned chalice. Deputy prime minister Wan Azizah has said privately LGBT people should have equal rights so long as they keep their “practice” behind closed doors and do not “glamourise their lifestyle”.

Others have been more forthright in their public condemnation. The minister for religious affairs, Mujahid Yusof Rawa, has said the government would “take proactive measures to curb the growing lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender issues, and help them to return to the right path and lead a normal life”. The deputy minister for public affairs, Dr Lee Boon Chye, stated last week that LGBT people have an “organic disorder”.

The first public victim of the push was Numan Afifi, who is gay and an [LGBT rights](#) activist. He was appointed press secretary to the minister of youth and sports in July but had to step down within days in response to an opposition campaign.

“I always anticipated there would be some backlash to my appointment but I didn’t expect it to happen in the first week, and we weren’t prepared for how fierce it would be,” says Numan. “Trans

women are now reporting to us they are being harassed by their employers, some were forced to cut their hair suddenly or dress differently.”

Numan’s resignation was only the beginning. Also in July, authorities organised a seminar for 300 school counsellors, teachers and government officials which focused on ways to avert and “cure” LGBT behaviour. Then, in August, the minister for religious affairs ordered the portrait of two prominent LGBT rights activists, Nisha Ayub and Pang Khee Teik, to be removed from a public art exhibition. He also announced a regulator would be set up to monitor LGBT activity online. The opposition women’s minister said last week LGBT people should be banned from teaching in nursery schools, and a campaign to boycott businesses run by trans people is gaining momentum.

Charles Santiago, a politician from the ruling coalition, has been one of the few to stand up for the community. “These are citizens of our country, they are part of the Malaysian family and they cannot be discriminated against,” he said.

The campaign of hate, he said, “was likely to get worse”.

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The Guardian

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