

Anti-Gay Fervor in Uganda Tied to Right-Wing US Evangelicals

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Human rights activists in Uganda are warning that the lives of gay people are in danger after a newspaper published a front-page story featuring the names and photographs of what it called Uganda's 100 "top" gays and lesbians alongside a yellow banner that read "Hang Them." We look at the ties of the anti-gay movement in Uganda to the far-right evangelical movement here in the United States with Jeff Sharlet, author of *C Street: The Fundamentalist Threat to American Democracy*.

See video here: http://www.democracynow.org/2010/10/21/anti_gay_fervor_in_uganda_tied

Guest:

Jeff Sharlet, author of the bestseller *The Family* and contributing editor for *Harper's Magazine* and *Rolling Stone*. He traveled to Uganda earlier this year and wrote in-depth articles on the anti-gay legislation and David Bahati for *Harper's Magazine* and *The Advocate*. He is an assistant professor of English at Dartmouth College.

Rush transcript:

JUAN GONZALEZ: Human rights activists in Uganda are warning that the lives of gay people are endangered after a newspaper published a front-page story featuring the names and photographs of what it called Uganda's "top" 100 gays and lesbians, alongside yellow banner that read "Hang Them." The article appeared earlier this month in the new Ugandan weekly newspaper *Rolling Stone*, which is not affiliated with the US magazine by the same name.

Its publication came just days after the first anniversary of the introduction to Parliament of an anti-gay bill that calls for the death penalty or life imprisonment for some homosexual acts. The proposed legislation was stalled after an international outcry, including from President Obama, who called the bill "odious."

AMY GOODMAN: Less talked about are the ties between the anti-gay measure and the far-right evangelical movement here in the United States. The author of the bill is David Bahati, a Ugandan lawmaker who has close ties to US organized evangelical groups that operate across several African countries. The groups are members of parliamentary prayer fellowships organized by the Family, one of the most powerful Christian conservative groups in Washington, DC.

The Family, also known as the Fellowship, is so highly secretive it didn't even admit it existed until last year, when three political sex scandals, those of South Carolina Governor Mark Sanford, Nevada Senator John Ensign, and former Mississippi Congress member Chip Pickering, forced it into the

open. All three men lived at one time in the Family's clubhouse on Capitol Hill, known as the "C Street House."

For more, we're joined by journalist and author Jeff Sharlet, author of the bestseller *The Family*. His new book is *C Street: The Fundamentalist Threat to American Democracy*. He traveled to Uganda earlier this year and wrote in-depth articles on the anti-gay legislation for Harper's Magazine and The Advocate. Jeff Sharlet joins us now from Dartmouth College, where he's an assistant professor of English.

Jeff, welcome to Democracy Now! Tell us about the latest in Uganda. What's happening there?

JEFF SHARLET: Hi, Amy. Good to be back with you.

Well, this article in *Rolling Stone*, the Ugandan *Rolling Stone*, what it marks is really an escalation. We've already seen this happening in Uganda. *Rolling Stone* is a new paper. The big national tabloid, you might say, is called *Red Pepper*, and they've been publishing so-called kill lists for some time now, with names, sometimes addresses, photographs, of gay people. You see also some Ugandans taking out ads in these papers to say, "Here's this person I don't like, arrival at work," or something like this, "I have secret information that he's gay." This idea of sort of formalizing the list, naming the top hundred, this is a real escalation.

And I think what it shows us, and with what's going on in the bill right now and what's alarming, is the bill hasn't been passed. It got stalled after it was introduced, in response to international pressure. But it's still there. It's, in effect, kind of a tiger on a leash that the regime can let off depending on its own fortunes in upcoming elections. And what I'm hearing from David Bahati, the author of the bill, with whom I remain in touch, that he is now being promised a second reading. And I think this new step in the press is a very alarming one, because it shows it moving right back to the forefront of Ugandan society.

JUAN GONZALEZ: Now, you've been documenting the enormous influence of these right-wing evangelical groups here in the United States on the debate in Africa. You mention this one church, in particular, Canyon Ridge megachurch in Nevada. Could you talk about what they have been doing?

JEFF SHARLET: Canyon Ridge, it's a megachurch in Las Vegas. What's interesting about it is it's not even a far-right megachurch, and there's a lot of members of Canyon Ridge who would be, I think, really outraged if they understood that their church was supporting one of the leaders of the anti-gay movement, Pastor Martin Ssempe, who's also received US federal dollars, PEPFAR money. He has testified before our Congress. He's held up as a champion in the fight against AIDS. His method has boiled down to "kill them." The Canyon Ridge Church, there's been a lot of pressure put on it, and I should say, by the way, by some evangelical activists. There's a man named Warren Throckmorton, a professor at a Christian college, who's been leading the fight to get Canyon Ridge to be accountable for the fact that they are financing part of this campaign. But, you know, even that is just one piece of this equation.

You go back to David Bahati, the member of Parliament who is doing this, and Minister of Ethics James Nsaba Buturo, and their connections are even a little higher up. They're with people like Senator Jim Inhofe, who's been over to visit with them and teach them, as they put it, how to manage their society according to Jesus. John Ashcroft has been over to visit them. So you see this is kind of—this goes just from a rogue megachurch in Las Vegas, which is very important—we've got to concentrate that—all the way to the kind of—the right flank of the Republican Party.

AMY GOODMAN: I want to turn to a clip of the Ugandan MP David Bahati, the author of the anti-gay

bill. In an interview on Vanguard on Current TV, he was asked whether he thought some US evangelicals, like Rick Warren, supported his bill but are rejecting it after international pressure.

DAVID BAHATI: The many friends that we have, especially the evangelicals, in America, when we speak to them privately, they do support us. They encourage us. But they are in a society that is very hostile, and we appreciate that. And we have said, "Do what you think is right for your conscience. But at the same time, remember that we are engaged in a spiritual battle, we are engaged in a very difficult battle, and it's important that you come out clearly." But we accept that they are in a very hostile environment, because America has—some of the many leaders in America have been blackmailed by pro-gay communities. But we have support in America. There are people who support what we're engaged in. There are many, many Americans who don't accept homosexuality as a human right, who take it as sin. They know it. But how do we treat these homosexuals is a matter that all of us are disagreeing. There are those who think that we should appreciate them, be tolerant to them, but for us here, we are saying, no, we shouldn't. We should call a sin "sin," because we cannot relate to the Bible.

AMY GOODMAN: That's Ugandan MP David Bahati, author of the anti-gay bill that he drafted just weeks after a major conference that a number of US evangelicals attended. Jeff Sharlet, talk about this conference.

JEFF SHARLET: Well, to be honest, actually, I think too much emphasis has been on the conference. This is a guy named Scott Lively, who's a fringe character in the United States, author of a book called *The Pink Swastika*. He argues that the Holocaust was actually sort of a result of a gay conspiracy, as was the Rwandan genocide. He went over with a more mainstream group called Exodus, which sort of has the idea that they can cure people of homosexuality, and they had this conference back in spring of 2009. The bill did emerge after that.

But I went over, and I wanted to spend time with Bahati, because something about that didn't add up, the idea that this guy, who is a very sophisticated politician—when you sit down with him, you see that this guy is no fool—well-educated guy, that—is he really the dupe of these kind of US fringe characters? And he was pretty clear that that's not how he saw it. He appreciated the message they brought to Uganda. He said, "But this is something we've been working on for a while. This is something we care about. We recognize that those guys, with their—you know, their talk about the Holocaust and gay conspiracies"—David Bahati thinks they sound nutty. So this is, you know—when someone who has got genocide on the mind thinks that you're too extreme, you're really kind of far out there.

So, what I think is kind of important to understand is, these connections are much deeper. They go back for years and years and years. It's an exchange. I mean, just to look at David Bahati, he began his political career not in Uganda, but in the United States, when first he connected with some people related to a very mainstream Christian right organization called the Family Research Council. He came to the United States and studied at the Leadership Institute, the conservative grassroots political organizing institute, where he, as he puts it, you know, got to be on a first name basis with people, like Mitch McConnell and John Ensign, he met. And then they put him in touch with the Family, and he started making those connections. He had those political connections going back well before this conference. So, the reason I say this is that I think that progressives make a mistake when we focus too much on a fringe character like Lively and without recognizing that there are more mainstream currents going on here, and those are the ones we have to address, because Lively is easily dismissed. US senators, not so much.

JUAN GONZALEZ: Well, that's one of the things I wanted to ask you about, about the historical roots of why Uganda has become sort of the front line in this effort to spread across Africa these

draconian measures against gays and lesbians. Is there any historical basis, other than a few individuals who may have traveled to the United States, for why it's taken root there?

JEFF SHARLET: Well, again, there's more than a few individuals. You go back to the beginning of the current regime, Museveni, President Yoweri Museveni, which goes back to 1986, he came into power as something of a leftist. You go back and you look at the documents for the Family, and they're looking at this: "We need to make sure this government does not go in the wrong ideological direction, that it remain the most Christian nation in East Africa." By their own account, they facilitated the beginning of the US foreign aid relationship with Uganda, which has amounted to billions over the years. And they've been, in many ways—politicians connected with that, men like Senator Chuck Grassley, Inhofe, Ashcroft, have been the face of that foreign aid. And what's happened in Uganda is it's become this tremendous revival nation with a real sort of growth of religiosity. And, you know, frankly, that's done some wonderful things for the country. And homophobia wasn't really a part of it.

This is what's so fascinating. When you go and you speak to the people, talking about the bill, you say, "Well, how far back do you date this problem?" they say, "Oh, this is a very deep problem, the homophobia. Maybe 2003." And what's interesting there is 2003, 2004, US PEPFAR money to fight AIDS starts going into Uganda. Ugandan LGBT people start encountering human rights activists and health activists from the international community who are saying homosexuality is a human right. And they start seeing themselves, frankly, in a politicized sense. They said, "Wait a minute. We have a right. We can stand up for it." The Americans are very quick to push back. You've got a lot of big megachurches in Kampala, the capital, that are led by Americans, and they're saying to the Ugandans, "You are the new front line in this battle." I mean, just when I was in Kampala last, Pastor Lou Engle, who's a leader of the Christian right, was over there. And he said, "In America, we've lost the battle, but in Uganda, this is ground zero. You cannot just save Uganda; you can save America." So there's this sort of idea that they now have this world destiny.

AMY GOODMAN: So, Jeff Sharlet, let's take this back to the United States, take it back to what has become mainstream politics in the United States. Tell us more fully about the Family, about C Street, and about politicians today who are making these connections.

JEFF SHARLET: Well, you know, as we've discussed before, the Family is the oldest, most influential Christian conservative group—Christian conservative political group in Washington, dating all the way back to 1935, when it began as an anti-labor, anti-New Deal coalition, with the idea that bad economies are punishments from God for decadence, for immorality and for our attempts to regulate the market.

And you, you know, fast-forward to today and look at someone like Senator Jim DeMint of South Carolina, who's emerged as a standard-bearer of the Tea Party within the establishment, also a guy who lives in the subsidized tax-exempt church that the Family operates on Capitol Hill called C Street. It's registered as a church, although it performs none of the functions of a church. And there's a great group called Clergy Voice that's actually challenging them on that, the IRS. Jim DeMint is giving us that same rhetoric, saying that the kind of laissez-faire, the radical free market fundamentalist economic policies of the Tea Party are really part of a religious great awakening. And in that, he's joined by men like Senator Tom Coburn, who lives in the C Street House; Senator Sam Brownback, who's a former resident; Senator John Thune, recently moved out of the C Street House; Senator Inhofe, as I mentioned; and even some Democrats, like in the past—he's now distanced himself—Senator Mark Pryor, the pro-war, anti-gay, anti-choice, anti-labor, anti-healthcare, but pro-creationism Democrat from Arkansas, who once explained to me that the Family is really a bipartisan group. And he had learned the meaning of bipartisanship from the Family was that Jesus didn't come to take sides; He came to take over.

AMY GOODMAN: And talk about how the Family, how C Street, this place where Democrats and mainly Republicans have lived, came to be known. We mentioned it in the lede, but these various sex scandals.

JEFF SHARLET: Yeah, well, we had—last year we had Senator John Ensign, longtime resident of the C Street House—I met him there myself—and he, facing disclosure from his best friend and senior aide, whose wife he had had an affair with, confessed to an affair. And then Governor Mark Sanford, who at the time was a very bright presidential prospect for the Republican Party, a very charismatic guy, sort of publicly redefined the Appalachian Trail when he, you know, sort of described it as leading all the way to Argentina in the arms of his mistress there. Remember, he said he was hiking on the Appalachian Trail. And he said that he had been seeking counseling at C Street. The third affair was that of former congressman Chip Pickering, a major telecom activist, or lobbyist now, an activist—he’s a lobbyist—who actually conducted his affair in the C Street House, this place registered as a church, according to divorce papers filed by his wife, meeting with his mistress, who was a telecom heiress, for whom he left Congress to become a lobbyist. So all these affairs started bubbling up, and for a while it was just sort of titillating.

But I think the ideological shift occurred when Governor Sanford, explaining why he was not going to resign, as he had called upon Clinton to do in similar circumstances, was that because he was like King David in the Bible, King David who does some terrible things at times, seduces another woman, arranges to have her husband killed, yet remains in power because he’s chosen by God for leadership. Well, that’s a core teaching of the Family. And I returned to the story and decided, look, I’m going to update this book and write a book about—the last book was sort of about the Family and history. C Street is about what they’re doing right now, starting with those scandals, but then following the money and the ideas out into the world, out into Uganda, out into the Middle East, out throughout Africa, and out into American domestic affairs, as well, where we see that idea of—that some politicians are chosen. We can see that, in an affair, a sex scandal, it’s kind of goofy. But when we’re talking about, say, David Bahati, it becomes really very frightening.

AMY GOODMAN: And finally, the title of your book, C Street: The Fundamentalist Threat to American Democracy. This is not fringe. You don’t see this as fringe in the United States, when you’re talking about “the fundamentalist threat to American democracy.” Jeff Sharlet?

JEFF SHARLET: No, you know, in one of the sort of the final chapters of the book, I follow it back from Uganda. And by the way, I should say that most of the Americans—and this is good news—most of the American politicians have sort of said, “Well, we don’t—things have gone too far in Uganda. We don’t support that.” The Family—the Americans officially don’t support it. The question is one of accountability. There doesn’t seem to be any accountability for David Bahati. He’s told me that he can—he’s never received any real opposition. But so, I followed that problem there in Uganda—so, OK, this is what’s going on in Uganda, this is sort of the nightmare scenario—I followed it back to the United States and in the US armed forces, where groups linked to the Family—not the same as the Family—but that’s where you see the real flowering of a kind of a militarized, politicized fundamentalism, that leads you into situations where you have something like the 15,000-strong Officers’ Christian Fellowship. This is not fringe.

These are officers defining their mission as reclaiming territory for Christ in the military, not allowing the opposition—this is how they put it—not allowing the opposition, all of which is spearheaded by Satan, to stand in their way. They describe military personnel who don’t share their religious beliefs as “spiritual terrorists.” They describe the war in Iraq and Afghanistan as a “spiritual war of the greatest magnitude.” And you even have situations where you have senior officers—I spoke to one three-star general, who used language to describe the situation we can’t even—you know, we can’t say on TV, said this is an “F-ing clown show,” where you have senior

officers promoted on the basis of religion, not merit. You have strategy, you have military decisions being based on the Book of Revelation, in some cases. You have troops who are being forced to pray, to traditions not their own. And you have the military, in every way, sort of fulfilling, you know, the kind of al-Qaeda charge against the United States. There's folks in the military—the vast majority of military personnel are honorable folks, but there's a very strong core within it that sees their mission not as defending democracy, but as expanding Christ's kingdom.

And, you know, you take that story that starts in this little townhouse on C Street, that expands out into the world through the efforts of men like Senator Inhofe and Senator Coburn, reaches its worst scenario in Uganda, but then you see it kind of simmering and on a boil in the United States, and you realize that fundamentalism, an issue—a political fundamentalism—we've got to distinguish that from just people who have private beliefs—an issue that people felt was not part of American life is still very much present and still presenting a real challenge to the pluralist idea, the open public square of democracy idea, where everybody gets to come in and share their ideas.

AMY GOODMAN: Jeff Sharlet, we want to thank you very much for being with us, author of the bestseller *The Family*, contributing editor for *Harper's Magazine* and *Rolling Stone*, his new book is *C Street: The Fundamentalist Threat to American Democracy*, speaking to us from Dartmouth College, where he teaches English.