

LGBT Pride: Marching on the Front Lines

Written by Elise Carlson-Rainer

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ELISE CARLSON-RAINER, JUL 1 2015

Commemorating the Stonewall riots of June 1969 in New York, contemporary Pride marches have become an annual focal point for celebrating LGBT culture and identity: they are also a critical moment of political solidarity and agenda-shaping for the global LGBT movement. Nigel Warner, a prominent leader in the LGBT global movement and the ILGA-Europe Council of Europe Adviser[1], asserted this month that “Pride marches are still the front line of the movement”.[2] While Pride marches are growing in numbers and popularity in liberal democracies, these events remain a highly contested, politically divisive, and at times, even violent moment for many LGBT groups around the world.

To organize and participate in Pride marches in places such as Pakistan and Jordan, activists risk societal and official police violence. Far right political groups, nationalist organizations, and religious extremists also use Pride to publically oppose equality. These groups oppose LGBT equality often on religious, culture, or nationalist grounds. For example, “Focus on the Family”, a conservative Christian organization, perceives “homosexual rights” as a threat to “traditional social mores and values”. In Georgia, police have let lynch mobs attack the Pride participants they were supposed to protect. Two years ago in Tbilisi, Orthodox priests led an attack on LGBT activists that injured 28 people. In India, participants are regularly arrested and subject to police brutality. Activists can be threatened with being ‘outed’ and ostracized for participating in Pride. Even with these potential dire consequences, participants turn out in higher numbers annually across the globe.

This week in Kiev, approximately 2000 police officers were assigned to protect just 300 Pride participants against violence from far right counter demonstrators. Even with this protection, counter demonstrators threw stones and smoke bombs, injuring approximately nine police officers and ten participants. While this sounds grim, Ukrainian participants were not able to march at all last year due to lack of police protection; it was thus seen as a political gain to secure protection this June. The march was also attended by the Swedish ambassador to Ukraine, Members of the EU Parliament, and a representative from the United States Embassy in Kiev. In a June 5, 2015 statement U.S. Chargé d’Affaires Bruce Donahue reiterated President Obama’s commitment to upholding “LGBT rights as human rights” and stated that “this weekend, as Kiev Pride marches in support of equality for LGBT persons in Ukraine, the United States stands with them.”

This is a relatively new, and somewhat surprising, foreign policy development for the US. Through the leadership of former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, it began to promote LGBT rights as part of its broader human rights foreign policy agenda in 2011. And yet at the time, LGBT equality was, and remains, a contested issue in the United States. According to the Pew Research Center, in 2011 only 45% of Americans favored “gays and lesbians to marry legally” and 58% of the population believed “homosexuality should be accepted by society.” Public opinion on these issues is rapidly changing. It differs greatly according to party lines and age, with more support for equality increasing by the year. But it still remains a divisive issue.

Currently, US diplomats and ambassadors worldwide are charged with participating in host country Pride marches, supporting LGBT civil society groups, and advocating for LGBT equality in diplomatic exchanges. In February 2015, the US took another bold leadership step in appointing Randy Berry as the first-ever Special Envoy for the Human Rights of LGBT Persons; the US is now one of the only countries in the world with an Ambassador level government official to focus specifically on LGBT rights in formal diplomacy.[3]

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Sweden, too, is a global leader on LGBT rights in domestic and international policies. It has some of the most robust LGBT equality laws and cutting edge foreign policy goals to promote LGBT rights in its development programs. Similarly, Stockholm's Pride events are some of the most dynamic and comprehensive LGBT political events in the world. It has been celebrated for 41 years and activists come from all over the globe to engage on LGBT rights. Groups discuss ways for Swedish diplomats and leaders to elevate equality policies in formal diplomatic channels and through informal transnational networks. Stockholm's Pride week has become a lightning rod for public engagement and debate on national and international LGBT rights. Similar to Stockholm, Pride events in Berlin, Amsterdam, and other capitals of liberal democracies are trending toward a more global agenda for LGBT rights.

Diplomatic advocacy and support from transnational networks is critical for groups in regions where LGBT rights remain violently contested. Renowned LGBT social movement scholar, Phillip Ayoub, argues that fledgling movements are dependent on international resources and transnational networks to make their cause visible. He also finds that reticent states are more inclined to see policy adoption as a means to gain external legitimacy and improve their reputation [4]. Thus, states such as Poland and Slovenia have adopted stronger LGBT policies in order to elevate their status in the EU. Large and small EU states alike, such as Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden – in concert with international NGOs – have successfully lobbied to make LGBT equality policy adoption an essential criteria for entering the EU.

Pride is an opportunity for coalitions with other interests and to improve LGBT visibility, as well as to forge intersections between social movements. For example, in Turkey LGBT groups have allied with Kurdish political parties and called for greater freedom of assembly during public events. The extent to which LGBT groups are allowed to organize is often reflective of civil society as a whole. In places such as Russia, even attempting to march has become a rallying cry for freedom of expression, assembly, and promoting broader civil liberties. As societal and political reception of Pride events are often indicative of local LGBT legal and social status, many places around the globe, such as Iraq, and Afghanistan, do not allow Pride marches at all.

In liberal democracies, Pride parades draw crowds in the hundreds of thousands, even millions. San Francisco's Pride Parade, the largest in the United States, gathered an estimated 1.7 million in 2014; São Paulo's, with approximately 2 million attendees on June 7, is the largest in the world. Marchers target their efforts towards anti-discrimination laws in the work place, adoption rights, same sex-marriage, and more. The Pride agenda, however, is very different in authoritarian regimes, where advocating for LGBT rights is, at times, still a question of life or death.

Approximately 80 countries globally still outlaw homosexual sex; eight of these countries enforce the death penalty for persons convicted of homosexual relations. Lesbian women in places such as Jamaica and sub-Saharan Africa are commonly subjected to "corrective rape." Some countries force people identified as LGBT into hormone therapy treatment and deport people diagnosed with HIV/AIDS.

Pride events have been, and remain, a critical moment of visibility for the movement. This week, the city of Seattle painted the sidewalks in Capital Hill, the neighborhood that annually hosts Pride, in rainbow colours; a symbolic gesture from the local government to show its support for LGBT equality year-round. On June 7, Ambassadors from Australia, Austria, the U.K. and the U.S. marched together in Cyprus' Pride march and there has been unprecedented diplomatic collaboration for LGBT equality worldwide.

During this June's LGBT Pride celebrations, the global movement will continue to progress and create new alliances and strategies for gaining equality. The power and importance of Pride marches cannot be overstated. Globally, Pride marches remain a catalyst for LGBT groups and allies to collectively organize, positively shape public opinion, call for reforms, and advocate for their fundamental human rights worldwide.

Notes

[1] International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans And Intersex Association

[2] Interview with the author, June 9, 2015.

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[3] Other countries, and the EU, are currently discussing appointing a similar position in their governments, which will likely happen in the near future.

[4] Ayoub, Phillip M. 2015. "Contested norms in new-adopter states: International determinants of LGBT rights legislation." *European Journal of International Relations* vol. 21 no. 2 293-322.

NB: The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Department of State or the U.S. Government

About the author:

Elise Carlson-Rainer is a former Foreign Affairs Officer in the U.S. Department of State in the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor; she worked to create and implement human rights policy in North Africa and Gulf countries. She is currently a Ph.D. Candidate at the University of Washington, Jackson School of International Studies. She specializes in Swedish and U.S. politics, human rights foreign policy, and LGBT rights.