

Criminalized: Gay Marriage, Same-Sex Relationships Illegal in Nigeria

Nigeria's House of Representatives passed a bill on Thursday to criminalize gay marriage, same-sex "amorous relationships" and even membership of a gay rights group, defying pressure from Western powers to respect gay and lesbian rights.

The bill, which contains penalties of up to 14 years in prison, passed Nigeria's Senate in late 2011, but President Goodluck Jonathan must approve it before it becomes law.

Two similar bills have been proposed since 2006 but this is the first time one has passed through the national assembly.

A spokesman for the presidency did not respond to a request for comment.

As in much of sub-Saharan Africa, anti-gay sentiment and persecution of homosexuals is rife in Nigeria, so the new legislation is likely to be popular.

Under existing Nigerian federal law, sodomy is punishable by jail, but this bill legislates for a much broader crackdown on homosexuals and lesbians, who already live a largely underground existence.

While European countries, most recently France, have moved to offer same-sex couples the same legal rights enjoyed by heterosexuals, many African countries are seeking to tighten laws against homosexuality.

Britain and some other Western countries have threatened to cut aid, a threat which has helped hold back or scupper such legislation in aid-dependent nations like Uganda and Malawi.

They have little leverage over Nigeria, whose budget is funded by its 2-million-barrel-per-day oil business.

“Persons who enter into a same-sex marriage contract, or civil union commit an offence and are each liable on conviction to a term of 14 years in prison,” the bill says.

“Any person who registers, operates or participates in gay clubs, societies and organisations or directly or indirectly makes public show of same-sex amorous relationship in Nigeria commits an offence and shall each be liable on conviction to a term of 10 years in prison.”

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