THE GEOPOLITICS OF HOMOPHOBIA

By **Michel MAIETTA**
SENIOR RESEARCH FELLOW AT IRIS

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IRIS
INSTITUT DE RELATIONS INTERNATIONALES ET STRATÉGIQUES

Homophobia is understood as the discrimination of all kinds against LGBT people (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender). If "political homophobia" is already known as an effective operator for political duplicity in internal affairs, Michel Maietta explore further its manipulative power through the geopolitical lens. The author reminds how strategic LGBT rights protection is in the broader defence of human rights.

LGBT rights movements have made large gains around the world since the 2000s. They have brought about important legislative changes like legal protections and same-sex marriage recognition. They have pursued an effective liberal strategy, working within the existing political structures to advance their interests. The recognition of LGBT rights as human rights has proved especially effective. In 2011, the UN Human Rights Council passed a Resolution on "Human Rights, Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity"[1], while later in the year US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton gave a speech at the UN on International Human Rights Day stating, "gay rights are human rights"[2]. Such events marked a significant milestone in the advancement of LGBT rights and their normalisation into the political thinking of a growing proportion of the international community. LGBT rights are now being promoted through international relations and by intergovernmental organisations such as the UN. They are also increasingly being adopted by nations around the world along with other human rights and liberal norms. Among States, this is largely being driven by Western nations, which gives opponents of LGBT rights a rhetorical opening to portray it as Western cultural practice rather than a universal human right. As the LGBT rights movement has been gaining strength, opponents have been improving their use of political homophobia and we are starting to see instances of political homophobia play out on the world stage.

POLITICAL HOMOPHOBIA

Since the early 21st century there has been a rise in political homophobia. The rhetoric of hate by public figures gives rise to a wider homophobia among the population. Despite what such leaders say, they are creating the hostile climate, not responding to it. Political homophobia is also very modular in that it can be used in disparate contexts around the world regardless of distinctions in their culture, religion, history, etc. As long as there is some underlying homophobia within society then it can be exploited for political ends. Its use then increases as more political leaders see how effective it can be and share best

[1] UN General Assembly, Resolution 17/19 Human rights, sexual orientation and gender identity, Follow-up and implementation of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, 14 July 2011, p. 1-2, https://www.ohchr.org/documents/issues/discrimination/a.hrc.19.41_english.pdf
[2] Amnesty International, https://www.amnestyusa.org/clinton-to-united-nations-gay-rights-are-human-rights

practices with their like-minded peers, both domestically and internationally. Political homophobia has three main purposes.

Firstly, political homophobia is a deliberate strategy to scapegoat sexual and gender minorities[3]. Politicians and social influencers fuel pre-existing prejudices to redirect the public's social grievances towards an expedient target. The target is not chosen because they are responsible for any of the ills plaguing society, but because they are a safe target who does not have the power to retaliate against the wider political and social system. Scapegoating as a political strategy can then serve to rally support from a conservative public and divert anger away from the establishment's own failures of governance[4]. For example, Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan passed sweeping laws criminalising not only same-sex marriage but public displays of affection and LGBT organisations. This was done in the lead up to an election and at a time when he was facing mounting political pressure from a corruption scandal, defection from his party, and the Boko Haram insurgency[5]. Additionally, Russia's scapegoating of LGBT individuals was part of redefining the Russian national identity in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse and was designed to distract the public from the ongoing economic problems[6].

Secondly, political homophobia can be used to suppress the opposition. Such suppression extends beyond the scapegoated sexual or gender minority to target real or perceived enemies. Governments can use indefinite or imprecise legal language for anti-gay laws to circumvent established legal protections[7]. In its most direct form, individuals can be accused of violating laws against same-sex relationships, as for example in the arrest of the Malaysian opposition leader, Anwar Ibrahim. However, more frequently and more insidiously, it is used to suppress dissent, such as through the "gay propaganda" laws in Russia and Kyrgyzstan. Targeting LGBT individuals also provides the cover for a broader suppression of civil society. An NGO or political movement can be accused of promoting immoral behaviour and then banned outright or prevented from receiving foreign funding. This extends beyond just LGBT rights groups to those working more broadly on human rights and who may therefore be critical of the government.

Finally, political homophobia is used for geopolitical ends. Whereas the first two uses are for domestic political purposes, this "geopolitical homophobia" applies to international relations. Governments use homophobia to differentiate themselves from the West:

[3] Human Rights Watch, "No Support Russia's 'Gay Propaganda' Law Imperils LGBT Youth", 11 December 2018, accessible at https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/12/11/no-support/russias-gay-propaganda-law-imperils-lgbt-youth

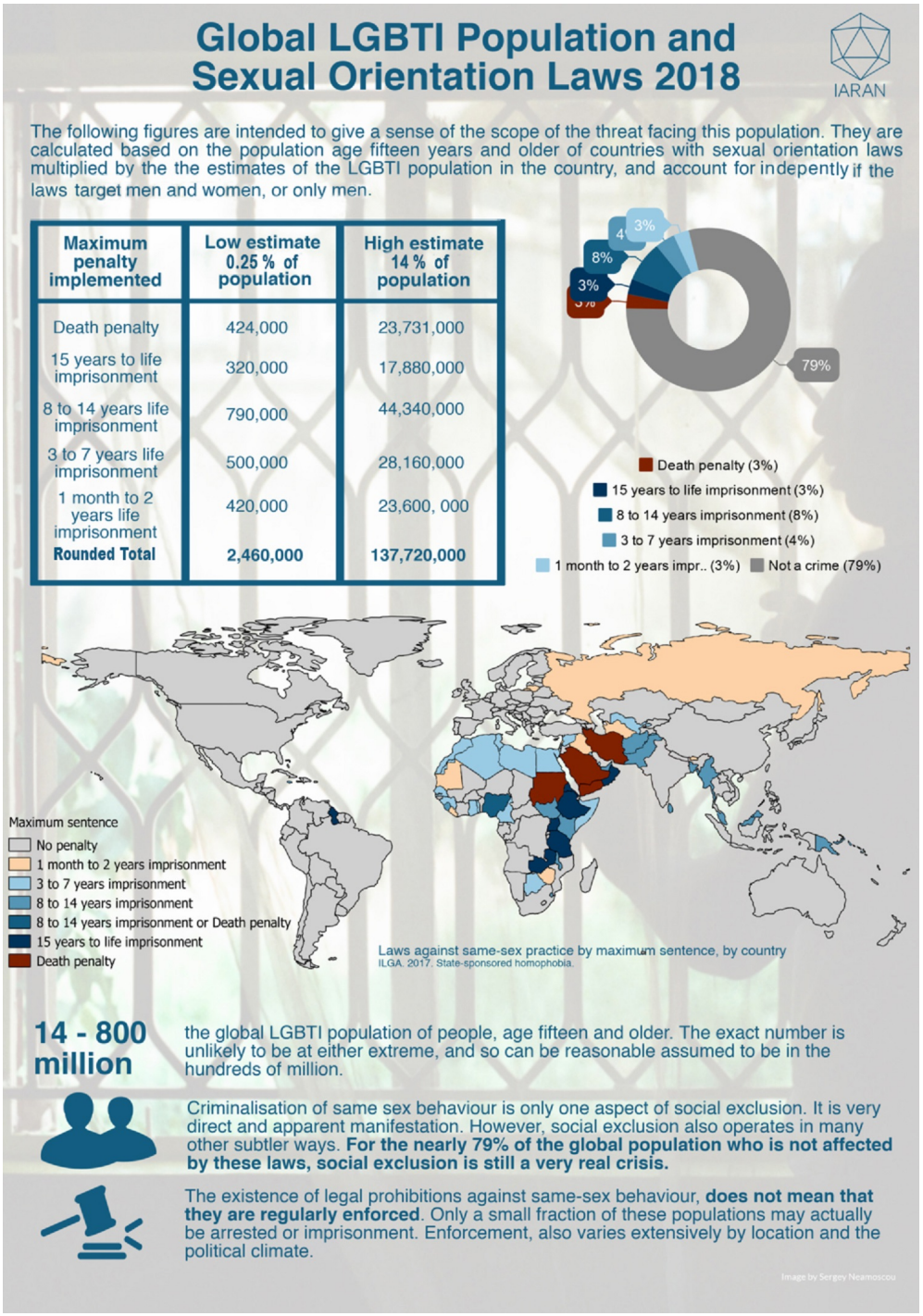
[4] Graeme Reid, "Homophobia as a Political Strategy", *Human Rights Watch*, 29 June 2015, https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/06/29/homophobia-political-strategy

[5] Richard Downie, "Revitalizing the Fight against Homophobia in Africa", *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, May 2014, pp. 1-2, https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/140506_Downie_HomophobiaAfrica_Web.pdf

[6] Nikita Sleptcov, "Political Homophobia as a State Strategy in Russia", *Journal of Global Initiatives* Vol.12, No.1, 2017, Russia Relations in Today's World, January 2018, pp. 140-161, https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1234&context=jgi

[7] Graeme Reid, "Homophobia as a…", art. cit.

rejecting LGBT rights is a symbolic means of rejecting the broader Western-led liberal world order.



The map of LGBT rights around the world today very closely resembles the spheres of influence during the cold war from sixty years ago. NATO members and allies largely having legal protections and recognitions for LGBT individuals, while Warsaw Pact members and allies, along with neutral nations and colonies tend towards discriminatory legislation instead.

GEOPOLITICAL HOMOPHOBIA

Since the end of the Cold War, Russia has continued to lose its international power as former Soviet States and Warsaw Pact allies turn towards the West. In Eastern Europe, former Soviet States are joining the EU, cementing their break from Russian influence. Both symbolically and literally, Russia has been fighting to retain some of the last ones, particularly after Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova signed Association Agreements in 2014. One of Russia's strategies is linking the West with homosexuality whilst provoking homophobia in these countries. The EU's human rights conditions are then more likely to be rejected by the public as politicians portray such conditions as normalising homosexuality and undermining traditional values.

While Russia is the leading actor behind geopolitical homophobia around the world, it is not the only state to employ this strategy. Many African States are promoting homophobia to counter what they claim to be cultural imperialism from the West when ironically, homophobia in Africa is largely the product of European colonialism from previous centuries[8]. Its use serves both domestic political purposes and regional power dynamics. For example, Nigeria's passage of anti-LGBT laws in 2014 was part of a regional geopolitical move to position itself against South Africa. South Africa is one of the regional powers and a leading proponent of LGBT rights on the continent. Nigeria, as the other regional power, is seeking to promote itself over South Africa by claiming to be more "authentically African"[9]. Such a discourse relies on South Africa's history as a Western nation and the taint of apartheid. Nigeria is seeking to show that South Africa's support of LGBT rights is a continuation of this heritage and that it does not represent the culture or people of sub-Saharan Africa. By this logic, African states should align themselves with Nigeria, who will protect their cultural rights, rather than South Africa, who they insinuate will perpetuate cultural imperialism and impose foreign beliefs and immoral practices.

The use of political homophobia spreads between governments. If one state uses it effectively for domestic purposes others are more likely to employ the same tactic. However, geopolitically, States are also more likely to adopt it because there is greater security from Western or international reprisals if they do so as a bloc rather than as a lone state defying global norms. After anti-LGBT laws were passed in Uganda and Nigeria, there were proposals for similar legislation in DR Congo, Ethiopia and Kenya[10]. Any violation of LGBT rights, as with human rights generally, creates an enabling environment whereby others may engage in similar actions with few or no repercussions.

[8] Val Kalende, "Africa: homophobia is a legacy of colonialism", *The Guardian*, 30 April 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/30/africa-homophobia-legacy-colonialism
[9] Graeme Reid, "An Interview with Graeme Reid on Defending LGBT Rights", *Human Rights Watch*, 1 December 2017, https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/12/01/interview-graeme-reid-defending-lgbt-rights
[10] Richard Downie, "Revitalizing…", *op. cit.*

In sub-Saharan Africa, non-state actors are also very prominent in promoting geopolitical homophobia. Within the United States and other Western nations, there are ongoing cultural tensions between progressive and traditional values, similar to those playing out on the world stage. As the conservative side has lost ground, they have sought international support. For example, evangelical organisations have been some of the most vocally opposed to LGBT rights and those most involved in exporting homophobia. They are able to use missionary trips to promote a culture of hate while lobbying governments to establish it. One of the most notable outcomes of their work was the passage of the 2014 Anti-Homosexuality Act in Uganda, referred to in the Western media as the "Kill the Gays" bill. While the courts overturned the act shortly after its passage, this was an alarming development that showed how States could quickly institutionalise violence and criminalise LGBT individuals.

Intergovernmental organisations are increasingly becoming involved in the geopolitics of LGBT rights. As mentioned above, 2014 marked a greater acceptance among these actors of the position that "gay rights are human rights". They can now use their considerable political and economic influence to pressurise States into adopting pro-LGBT legislation and punish those that do the opposite. For example, the World Bank suspended a US$90 million loan to Uganda, which came in addition to direct aid from Western nations of over US$125 million. In late 2018, the World Bank also suspended visiting missions to Tanzania for the criminal targeting of LGBT individuals, while the EU withdrew its ambassador, and the UN. High Commissioner for Human Rights criticised the country[11].

While the geopolitics of LGBT rights is playing out around the world, one leading power is staying out of the fray, China. Chinese foreign policy is based on non-intervention and respect for state sovereignty. In practice, China works with other nations without requiring the protection of LGBT rights and, more generally, human rights. Doing so is also a means of deflecting from their own human rights record. Domestically, China neither criminalises nor protects LGBT individuals[12], though the government has made statements supporting further expansion of LGBT rights[13]. Internationally, China maintains its non-interventionist policy on LGBT issues, for example, abstaining from votes on the 2011 and 2014 LGBT resolutions at the UN Human Rights Council. However, China's abstention on such international issues promotes its economic and diplomatic relations with States opposed to LGBT rights. For example, the President of Tanzania praised China for providing assistance without conditions after the withdrawal of Western and international aid, here again after violent and discriminatory actions against

[11] George Steer, "What to Know About Tanzania's Anti-LGBT Crackdown", *Time Magazine*, 16 November 2018, http://time.com/5456826/tanzania-anti-gay-world-bank
[12] Tom Mountford, "China, The legal position and status of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in the PRC", 24 March 2010, https://www.outrightinternational.org/content/china-legal-position-and-status-lesbian-gay-bisexual-and-transgender-people-people%E2%80%99s
[13] Yanzi Peng, "Using the UN to advance LGBT rights in China", *Open Global Rights*, 6 November 2018, https://www.openglobalrights.org/using-the-un-to-advance-lgbt-rights-in-china

LGBT people in Tanzania[14]. By not criticising States who violate LGBT rights, China is also providing them with unspoken support and while China is not playing an active role in the geopolitics of homophobia, it is complicit in its dissemination. An example – or a counter-example – to ponder.■

[14] Agence France-Presse, "World Bank, EU cut Tanzania aid after rights crackdown", *Daily Nation*, 30 December 2018, https://www.nation.co.ke/news/africa/Donors-cut-aid-to-Tanzania-after-rights-crackdown/1066-4914998-boepn6/index.html

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Under the supervision of Marie-Cécile Naves, associate research fellow at IRIS.
naves@iris-france.org

The Gender and Geopolitics Observatory of IRIS aims to be a place of reflection and valorisation of inter and multidisciplinary research on the way gender, as a concept, research field and tool to analyse reality, can be used to understand geopolitics and be an instrument for decision-making in international affairs.

THE FRENCH INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND STRATEGIC AFFAIRS
2 bis rue Mercœur
75011 PARIS / France

T. + 33 (0) 1 53 27 60 60
contact@iris-france.org
@InstitutIRIS

www.iris-france.org