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Zanzibar bans gay sex

East African Island sets punishment for males at 25 years, females at seven

by Donald Miller

DAR ES SALAAM, Tanzania — Zanzibar has banned gay sex and set prison terms of up to 25 years for those who break the law, officials said on Aug. 20.

The law sets a penalty of life imprisonment for sodomy with a minor. The penalty for same-sex activity between men is 25 years in jail and seven years for lesbian sex. The sentence for men compares to death for murder in Zanzibar and a 30-year sentence for violent robbery or rape.

"This is what we have been aspiring for. If the government takes such steps, the country will really move ahead," said Sheikh Muhammed Said, a local Islamic leader.

Zanzibar is an island state within the United Republic of Tanzania and has its own semi-autonomous government made up of a Revolutionary Council and House of Representatives. The present government is led by the island's president, Amani Karume.

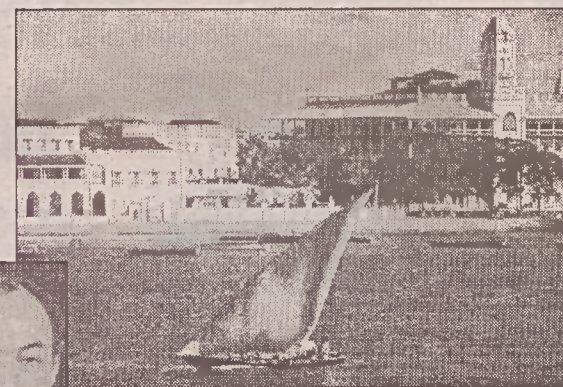
The office of Zanzibar's attorney general said the law took effect when Karume signed it the previous week. Zanzibar's parliament, in a rare show of unity, passed the bill unanimously in April.

Islamic groups have been calling for a more puritanical approach to public affairs on the Tanzanian Indian Ocean island, which is overwhelmingly Muslim and ordinarily a tourist haven.

Besides targeting gays, the groups have pushed for bars to be removed from residential areas.

As in most African countries, gays in Zanzibar have been regarded with disapproval and scorn. Until recently, however, there was a willingness on the island to turn a blind eye to discreet gay relationships.

Homosexuality was already illegal, but the move towards toughening the penalties as they stand now began when two gay men outraged conservative opinion by publicly celebrating their marriage at one of the island's hotels last year.



Once a popular tourist destination, the island of Zanzibar will see less of the gay tourist trade after passing a law which makes lesbian and gay sex punishable with stiff prison time. Zanzibar's President Amani Karume (inset) signed the law in early August.

"We cannot allow our society to crumble, to decay like this."

For decades Zanzibar has played host to a thriving, if somewhat covert, gay scene. Certain clubs and bars are known to be occasional gay hang-outs. At the Bwawani hotel, where the gay marriage was celebrated last year, men meet to flirt and sometimes dance with each other on a Tuesday night. At the Garage bar in Stone Town, the cultural heart of Zanzibar, Monday is the unofficial gay night. The future of these businesses is unknown.

Masoud said that criminal cases were unlikely if the island's gay population "behaved with discretion."

"So far as that [homosexuality] is done in private, it is not the concern of prosecutors," Masoud explained.

"But when it is in public, that is our concern — like when the two men openly celebrated their union at the Bwawani hotel. That caused a lot of complaints from the public. This is not a question of trying to spy on the private life of somebody, but when it is done publicly, there will be concern."

Even if prosecutions turn out to be rare, the new law on the statute books gives an effective tool for blackmail and repression.

Not surprisingly, the effect of the new law has reached well beyond the country's borders: travel agencies who specialize in trips for gays and lesbians have threatened to boycott Zanzibar, which relies heavily on tourism revenue.

— Wire services contributed to this report.

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