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Is Uganda's Antigay Fervor Spreading? An African Domino Theory, Examined.

by Katie Paul December 18, 2009

Uganda isn't the only star of the antigay show in East Africa anymore. Today, Rwanda's Parliament is also set to consider legislation that would for the first time make homosexuality a crime, punishable by five to 10 years in prison. The bill would also ban any activities that could be construed as "encouraging or sensitizing" same-sex relationships, eliminating advocacy and severely complicating medical treatment, especially for HIV/AIDS.

According to the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission's Cary Johnson, Uganda is setting the precedent. "Other than as a result of the political and military weakness of most of its neighbors, Uganda would have no real political juice, as Kenya is recognized as the intellectual, political, and economic powerhouse of the region," Johnson said in an interview earlier this week. "Kenya should be the powerhouse that sets the pace. But Kenya has fallen on hard times politically since its election fiasco, so now it's got its own fish to fry." Filling the void, Uganda is the one asserting moral leadership in the region. Domestically, its antigay drive makes for a convenient political ploy; with a war raging in north that the government can't contain, it's easy to gain popularity points by exploiting the myth of postcolonial attack on African masculinity. But the ploy could have international ramifications. If the law passes in Uganda, Johnson anticipates a domino effect of attempts in other countries throughout the region to tighten their legal codes.

But can the region's homophobic wave really be traced back to Uganda? At first glance, it's a tough sell. While the historical origins of antigay legislation are debatable, antipathy to homosexuality is by now a homegrown phenomenon throughout most of Africa. ABC's Dana Hughes, writing from Nairobi, points out that such opinions on homosexuality are already widespread on the continent. "While American evangelicals are being examined for their role in

the origins of the bill in Uganda," she writes, "East Africa, and for that matter Africa as a whole, is decidedly, virulently against homosexuality." In total, 37 countries in Africa have laws on the books criminalizing same-sex relations. Burundi's passed earlier this year, before the Ugandan bill even came before Parliament.

Still, precedents set in one country can inspire dormant culture wars to flare up anew in surrounding areas, especially when those areas are as connected as those in eastern Africa. Hughes sees that from her vantage point in Nairobi, too. "The law in Uganda is extreme, even by African standards, but the fallout may be a preview of Africa's own version of a 'culture war,'" she writes. Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and their neighbors are connected by mobile populations and religious networks. As Johnson notes, many influential leaders in Rwanda are, in fact, Ugandan; they grew up in Uganda, speak English, and hear voices like Stephen Langa, Scott Lively, Martin Ssempe, and Rick Warren coming across the airwaves. That even includes Rwandan President Paul Kagame; similarly, his wife grew up in Burundi, then lived in both Kenya and Uganda. The connections are evident on the op-ed pages of Rwanda's newspapers. "These homos are probably running out of Uganda and coming to Rwanda, where there is no specific law that prohibits them from practicing this forbidden habit," wrote one contributor to *The New Times*, Rwanda's state-owned paper. "Just like Ugandans have passed the antigay bill, Rwandans too should follow this path in order to maintain the integrity and dignity that we have held for all these decades." Whether its geopolitical reality or the boldness of its legislation is at root, Uganda is clearly setting an example.

Of course, that logic can work both ways. After months of fretful postings, *Box Turtle Bulletin* sees signs that the international diplomatic and media-badgering campaign may be having an effect in Uganda. A senior adviser to President Museveni recently denounced the bill in the government-owned *New Vision* newspaper, Uganda's largest. Today, Uganda's other main newspaper reports that Ethics and Integrity Minister James Nsaba Buturo—a key government leader who previously spoke enthusiastically of the proposal as "an opportunity for Uganda to provide leadership where it matters most"—has backed down, pledging to remain silent about the bill until it has been passed or defeated. It's probably no coincidence that these changes have come after weeks of denouncements from political and religious figures—and, perhaps more

importantly, threats to cut off aid and relocate an HIV/AIDS research center. If Ugandans were to lose their aid deals over the bill, would Rwandans think twice about pushing their own legislation through? That's a domino theory worth testing.