



ERIK (HASH) HERSMAN

THE TRUMP EFFECT: ELECTIONS AT HOME AND ABROAD DAMPEN LIBERIA'S GAY-RIGHTS REVIVAL

ROBBIE COREY-BOULET

MONROVIA, Liberia—Friday nights at Saji House, a Lebanese restaurant here, have, for several years now, been a draw for expats and upper-class Liberians alike. For a few hours each week, a place that typically offers little more than shawarma and bland pizza served beneath overhead fans transforms into an ad hoc dance club, loud and sweaty, with a DJ in an elevated booth mixing the Hot 100 with a dash of Trace Africa's Top 10.

On one of these nights not long ago, a Liberian woman in her early 20s named Fatu headed out to Saji with three friends, including a younger girl, a high school student, with whom she had been flirting for several weeks. As recently as 2014, Fatu concealed her attraction to women from everyone except close friends, but she has become more open lately, a process facilitated by her job at one of the country's most prominent nongovernmental organizations working with sexual minorities.

When she has a few drinks, any lingering reservations melt away, and on this particular night she began, in the middle of the crowd, to dance closely with her crush. Before long, she noticed she had attracted the attention of several people nearby, including a man who appeared to be filming her with his phone.

Emboldened by beer, Fatu, whose full name is being withheld because her family is not aware of her sexual orientation, confronted the man. "I said, 'Do you know me? Why would you take a video of me? We're not even friends!'" she recalled. The man denied recording anything, but Fatu snatched the phone out of his hand and immediately opened Snapchat, where she found two clips of herself from just moments earlier. One of them had already been posted. The second was still a draft. For a caption, the man had written, "This is what is happening in our country."

Now Fatu was angry. Taking the man's phone with her, she stalked over to the Saji security guards and played the clip for them. The guards approached the man. "I had the feeling to, you know, break his phone or even seize it," Fatu said, "but then they talked to me and they told me to just delete it and give it back to him, and they would put him outside." Sure enough, the guards, invoking a rule against filming other customers, threw the man out on the street.

No mention was made of the fact that Fatu had been dancing with another woman.

In bird's-eye surveys of LGBT liberation movements, individual acts of defiance such as Fatu's don't generally merit a mention. These narratives instead foreground high-profile showdowns: police raids, attacks on prominent activists, courtroom victories. Yet when stories like Fatu's multiply and build upon each other, they can signify momentous change. They capture the hostility people face living in a society that has long privileged anti-gay views—and, more importantly, how that hostility can sometimes be countered effectively with a little resistance.

In the context of Liberian activism, Fatu's dance-floor altercation was remarkable for another reason: Just five years earlier, amid Liberia's first proper nationwide gay panic, it would have been practically unthinkable. As Liberian lawmakers debated anti-gay bills and homophobic groups issued threats against people supporting rights for LGBT Liberians—even distributing a hit list in one Monrovia neighborhood—security concerns mandated that people like Fatu maintain low profiles, at least for a time.

Once the worst of the panic subsided, however, LGBT Liberians emerged from this defensive crouch and set about trying to change public opinion, an undertaking that has required countless confrontations, large and small, day after day. As the reaction to Fatu's dance-floor outburst shows, those fighting for LGBT rights are starting to make progress. But over the past year, the durability of these gains has been called into question by the shifting political winds on display during two presidential races: at home in Liberia, where voters will choose a successor to President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in October, and across the Atlantic Ocean, in the United States.

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CRIMINALIZING HOMOSEXUALITY

While many people know that Liberia was founded by freed American slaves, that fact alone does not do justice to the extent of U.S. influence in the country, which is evident today in everything from trade flows to Monrovia street fashion. Yet when the trouble for LGBT Liberians began in early 2012, it ostensibly reflected a desire to create some distance between Monrovia and Washington, in the name of national sovereignty.

In December 2011, Hillary Clinton, then the secretary of state, gave a speech at the U.N. Human Rights Council that coincided with an Obama administration memorandum directing “all agencies engaged abroad” to promote the human rights of LGBT people. Echoing her landmark speech on women’s rights delivered in Beijing in 1995, Clinton declared, “Gay rights are human rights and human rights are gay rights.”

The reaction from the Liberian press was overheated and, frankly, uninformed. Many outlets reported that the U.S. was making foreign aid conditional on a progressive approach to LGBT rights, and a remarkable number of journalists seemed to think the U.S. was demanding that Liberia allow same-sex marriage.

Journalists weren’t the only ones pushing the subject of America’s supposed imposition of LGBT rights to the top of the national agenda. Also in early 2012, Leroy Archie Ponpon, a notorious rabble-rouser, co-founded a group named the Movement for the Defense of Gays and Lesbians in Liberia, which began advocating publicly for same-sex marriage. When Ponpon appeared in public to make his pitch, mobs descended upon him, and the police had to intervene to rescue him.

Ponpon’s motives were unclear. He did not identify as gay, nor did he coordinate his efforts with anyone who did. Whatever his goal, the backlash against LGBT Liberians was gaining momentum.

Under Liberian law, “voluntary sodomy” is a misdemeanor fetching prison sentences of up to one year, though this provision is rarely invoked by police or the courts. The somewhat ambiguous nature of LGBT Liberians’ legal status—officially criminalized but not targeted for prosecution—is partly responsible for an activist movement that is underdeveloped compared to others in the region. By contrast, in countries like Cameroon, where anti-gay prosecutions are routine, LGBT-rights groups have long been pushing for legal reform and teaching LGBT Cameroonians how to deal with law enforcement. And in places like Ivory Coast, where alternative sexualities are not criminalized, such groups have been free to organize around an array of issues.

“EVERYTHING WE DO IN THIS COUNTRY IS JUST CENTERED AROUND THE UNITED STATES.”

Several Liberian elected officials decided in 2012 that the existing anti-gay law was insufficient. In the House of Representatives, Clarence Massaquoi introduced a bill that would have classified “same-sex sexual practices” as a second-degree felony punishable by up to five years behind bars. In the Senate, Jewel Howard Taylor, the ex-wife of Charles Taylor, the former president who is now a convicted war criminal, began pushing to make same-sex marriage a first-degree felony with a prison sentence of up to 10 years.

Amid this mounting hostility, LGBT Liberians were silenced, their voices left out of media accounts questioning their status as full citizens. Few allies came to their defense. This

isolation was on prominent display in March 2012, when Sirleaf, just three months after accepting the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo for her work on gender issues, appeared to defend the anti-sodomy law in an interview with *The Guardian*. Sitting next to former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who was in town to promote the work of his Africa Governance Initiative in Liberia and who refused to answer any questions on LGBT rights himself, Sirleaf said, “We’ve got certain traditional values in our society that we’d like to preserve.”

U.S. FUNDING

Four months after the interview was published, the Senate approved Jewel Howard Taylor’s bill criminalizing gay marriage, but that was as far as either piece of anti-gay legislation advanced. Eventually, in the press and among the political class, the debate over LGBT rights died down, and activists seized this moment to mount a quiet counteroffensive.

At the time of Clinton’s speech, there was just one Liberian organization devoted to working with sexual minorities: Stop AIDS in Liberia, or SAIL, which, as the name suggests, focuses on the prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS among men who have sex with men. The group had seven members working out of a cramped office in downtown Monrovia. Its executive director, Stephen McGill, who was widely seen by donors as the driving force behind SAIL’s activities, was living in the U.S.

Today, SAIL occupies a much larger space in a building in Monrovia’s Mamba Point neighborhood, a stone’s throw from the ocean. Its staff has quadrupled to 28, in no small part because its income has expanded significantly. Whereas previously the funds SAIL received were earmarked almost exclusively for HIV/AIDS programming, today about half a dozen groups, most of which are based in the U.S., finance SAIL’s work in both public health and human rights. This backing has

helped to make SAIL’s programming more inclusive, catering to lesbians, bisexual women, and transgender Liberians.

Beyond SAIL, at least five other organizations have sprung up to serve various constituencies within Liberia’s sexual minority milieu. There are now, for example, groups that work solely with queer women and transgender people. While a few of them are new and still looking for donor support, their leaders all view the U.S., and U.S.-based organizations, as critical sources of funding. Moreover, the American Embassy has provided low-profile encouragement to the movement, offering to send diplomats to court cases involving community members, make its facilities available for the groups’ activities, and raise the concerns of LGBT Liberians with government officials.

It is precisely because the U.S. has been so central to the growth of Liberia’s LGBT movement that last year’s election of President Donald Trump alarmed Liberian activists, who feared an immediate drop in material and moral support. In the days after the results were announced, as he processed the news of Trump’s victory, Evans Adofo, a program officer with SAIL, said he worried first about cuts for the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria, to which the U.S. is the biggest contributor. But he was also deeply troubled by reports that the new administration was deleting LGBT-related content from government websites. He watched uneasily as the White House let Pride Month come and go unacknowledged, and as Trump called for a ban on transgender people serving in the military.

Many Liberians, Adofo said, view such measures as indicators that LGBT rights are no longer a matter of concern for Washington even at home, much less in a place like Liberia. The consequences of diminishing outside pressure to uphold these rights could be devastating in a nation that has already demonstrated a willingness to single out its LGBT

citizens for abuse. “Everything we do in this country,” Adofo said, “is just centered around the United States.”

BOXED IN

For Adofo and his colleagues, this Trump-related anxiety was compounded by domestic politics. In late 2016, Liberian presidential candidates were beginning to make their cases to voters, and during that process the issue of LGBT rights again assumed heightened prominence.

At an event in September 2016 to announce his presidential bid, Prince Johnson, a former warlord who, in the eyes of his supporters, has made the transition to credible politician, put the issue front and center. “The government, under our watch, will never, ever accept gay rights,” he said in a speech. “Liberia is not Sodom and Gomorrah!”

The statement seemed largely out of sync with the concerns of a nation recovering from West Africa’s 2014-16 Ebola epidemic and preparing for its first transfer of power since the war years, which stretched from 1989 to 2003 and killed as many as 250,000 people. But Johnson has a record of homophobia stretching back to Liberia’s darkest days. While he is most notorious for his role in the execution of then-President Samuel Doe in 1990, he has also acknowledged that a fighter under his command killed Tecumseh Roberts, a singer described by the writer Stephanie Horton as “Liberia’s own Michael Jackson.” Testifying before Liberia’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2008, Johnson said Roberts was killed because of his suspected homosexuality, which he suggested had been crudely confirmed by Samuel Varnii, the man who shot him. “Gen. Varnii ordered Tecumseh Roberts to take off his trouser, and when he took off his trouser, it was discovered that his butt was rotten,” Johnson testified. “The man whole anus was rotten.”

Johnson’s campaign speech reintroduced respect for the rights of LGBT Liberians as a

matter up for debate. Other candidates soon began fielding questions from journalists on the subject. The Monrovia-based online newspaper Front Page Africa described LGBT rights as one of the major issues “that could or should decide” who would become the next president.

Rev. Kortu Brown, a prominent Pentecostal leader who in 2012 organized an effort to collect signatures for a petition condemning homosexuality and same-sex marriage, said in a recent interview that he remained wary of the threat LGBT activism posed to “traditional” culture. Asked how he thought the issue played politically, Brown said, “Any candidate who

IT’S ESSENTIAL TO CULTIVATE AN AFRICAN DONOR BASE TO FINANCE THE ACTIVITIES OF AN EMERGING COTERIE OF AFRICAN ACTIVISTS.

espouses gay marriage as a campaign tool will have a shock of their lives.”

Of course, no candidate in Liberia was championing same-sex marriage. But statements like Brown’s made clear there was a limited range of acceptable views on the topic. Alexander Cummings, a former Coca-Cola Company executive and a political newcomer, strayed outside that range in the eyes of some journalists by not sufficiently condemning the idea of LGBT rights at the start of his campaign. Before long, there was widespread speculation in the press that Cummings, perhaps tainted by his years working in the U.S., was a supporter of gay rights and even same-sex marriage.

Cummings denied this whenever he could. “From a personal perspective, it’s not a lifestyle

I encourage, that I support as a Christian,” he said in an interview at his campaign headquarters. At the same time, he said discrimination should not be tolerated in Liberia, and that, in any case, Liberian voters he met while campaigning were more concerned with issues like poverty. Then he said something that, perhaps inadvertently, touched on the extent to which even relatively tolerant politicians are boxed in when it comes to LGBT rights. “If you want to lead a people, you have to lead people to some extent where they need to go,” he said, “but you also have to meet people where they are. And I’m meeting Liberians where they are.”

A NEW GENERATION OF DONORS

One afternoon earlier this year, a group of around 20 Liberian gay men and transgender women crowded around a conference table in central Monrovia. Representing various groups engaged in the fight against HIV/AIDS, they had been selected to work as peer educators, meaning they would soon be traveling around the country bearing information intended to bring down the sky-high transmission rates affecting their communities. According to a 2013 survey conducted by the U.N. HIV/AIDS agency, UNAIDS, the prevalence rate among men who have sex with men in Liberia was 19.8 percent, compared to 2.1 percent for the general population.

Much of the workshop covered technical information about sexually transmitted illnesses and the reproductive system. But the frequent singing, occasional shouting, open flirting, and frank discussions of gay sex indicated the participants were getting something else out of the day: an opportunity to come together in a space unmarred by the homophobia and transphobia they might encounter on city streets. The fact that this was all taking place in the stuffy basement of a government ministry, a symbol of a state that officially outlaws the very sex they were describing, was a sign of how far Liberia’s LGBT movement had come since 2012.

Yet there were also plenty of reminders of how far they were from full acceptance. As the day wound down, participants were handed yellow sticky notes and instructed to write their fears and goals. The facilitator, a trans woman, then read these anonymous submissions aloud as the room listened in silence: “Hate speech.” “Too much overacting when we’re outside.” “I don’t want to be insecure.” “How do I make a new friend?” “My fear is to be exposed or arrested by police.” “Not to be showing off.” “Not to die alone.”

As they work toward building a Liberia in which those fears can be conquered and those wishes fulfilled, activists are now focusing on ensuring that the hard-won gains of recent years don’t become a casualty of the political season. While they are hopeful that they can continue to count on the U.S. as an ally, they are also aware that support from the Trump administration, which has proposed cutting diplomacy and aid budgets by a third, is not guaranteed.

Not everyone is despondent over this. Fatu, the dance-floor activist, said that regardless of the decisions made by U.S. officials, the influence of American culture would continue to push Liberians toward tolerance. She cited the TV series *Empire*, a hit in Liberia, and its gay character Jamal Lyon, played by Jussie Smollett, as an example of the type of visibility that was changing minds.

But those working in development in Liberia say that no amount of television exposure would make up for the loss of State Department leadership on the issue. “In Liberia, we’re not that many donors. We’re very, very, very few,” said Elisabeth Harleman, deputy head of mission at the Swedish Embassy, one of the top bilateral donors behind the United States. Diplomats still don’t have a clear idea of what concrete changes might be made to U.S. development policy, she said, but it’s difficult to imagine how programming would not be affected if the proposed funding cuts were approved.

“We hope that other donors will come in and cover, but who are those other donors?”

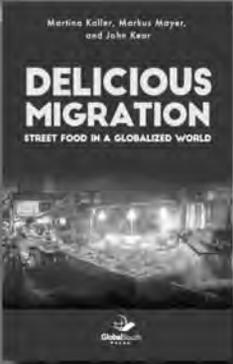
To some LGBT activists, the situation encapsulates the biggest problem facing the movement not just in Liberia, but across the continent. After all, a campaign dependent on outside support is not only exposed to allegations of pushing a foreign agenda. It is also vulnerable to the vagaries of global politics, which can stall momentum regardless of what’s happening on the ground. Cyriaque Ako, a seasoned LGBT-rights activist from Ivory Coast who has spent the past year trying to build up Liberia’s movement, is

not alone when he says it’s essential to cultivate an African donor base to finance the activities of an emerging coterie of African activists.

“I’m very practical in my approach. I very much appreciate foreign donors, and I thank those who have supported our cause,” Ako said. But he emphasized that the movement will only realize its full potential when it becomes self-sustaining. “I think,” he said, “that we need to work toward finding our own champions.” ●

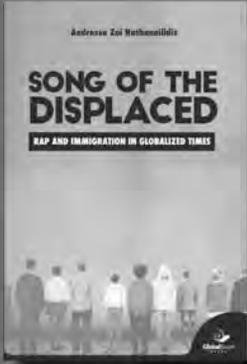
Robbie Corey-Boulet reported from Liberia on a fellowship from the International Reporting Project (IRP).

Amazing Titles From The Global South



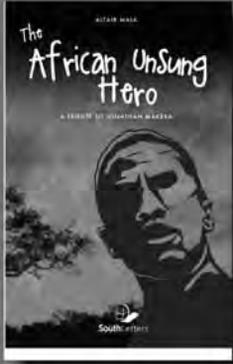
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