

M'sia's first gay movie makes it to HK film festival
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The Hong Kong Lesbian and Gay Film Festival (HKLGFF) opens today, offering new work from Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam and throwing a light on the challenges sexual minorities face around Asia.

With more than 30 full-length and short films on offer over two weeks, organisers said the festival promised new insight into what it is like to be gay in some of the world's most repressive societies.

Two weeks after Malaysian police effectively outlawed an annual gay rights event, HKLGFF organiser Joe Lam said Malaysia's first 'queer film', entitled 'In the Bottle', would be one of the festival's highlights.

Vietnam's first gay film, 'Lost in Paradise', and Thailand's first lesbian film, 'Yes Or No', were chosen to open the event as a way of showcasing the work of little-known Asian filmmakers, he said.

"It's quite good to see these countries starting to do gay movies. For their first movies they're not bad, so we decided to show them on the opening night," he told AFP.

"It shows they are changing and the world is changing, even in Muslim countries."

Homosexuality remains a taboo subject in Muslim-majority Malaysia, where sodomy is punishable by up to 20 years in prison.

Last month, members of the conservative opposition Islamic party PAS called for a November concert by British superstar Elton John to be banned on grounds that the openly gay singer promotes "hedonism" and would corrupt Muslims.

Two Malaysian states - Malacca and Pahang - are considering passing laws that could punish gay Muslims and gay rights supporters with prison sentences.

They exist

Last year a gay and lesbian film festival in Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim-majority country, went ahead despite protests from Islamist groups who threatened to attack participating cinemas.

Homosexuals face severe corporal punishment under Islamic by-laws in some parts of Indonesia.

Lam said that by highlighting the work of gay and lesbian artists from countries like Malaysia, the festival illustrated minority cultures that are forced underground.

"It's good for the community, so that people know they exist," he said.

The HKLGFF is in its 22nd year and Lam said it had never experienced significant problems, even though local mainstream media and Cantonese celebrities generally shunned the event.

"If the famous celebrities don't come, the mainstream media aren't interested," he said.

"The entertainment industry in Hong Kong is quite backward. Even though we know some gay actors who haven't come out, they don't want to come," he said.