

Debate highlights how tough it is to be gay
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John Grafilo, dpa

Ruling party leaders in Malaysia have lambasted opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim for nearly two weeks for a statement to a foreign broadcaster that they interpreted as expressing support for gay rights.

Ahmad Maslan, information chief of the ruling government coalition Barisan Nasional criticized Anwar for saying in an interview with the BBC that Malaysia's laws against sodomy and oral sex should be reviewed.

"As a Muslim, Anwar should know that the Muslims constitute 60 per cent of the population of the country," he said. "We cannot support or condone same-sex relationships as it is the same as making incest legal."

Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak said in reply to Anwar's interview that laws that protect and promote the interests of the people should not be amended.

Anwar spoke with the BBC shortly after being acquitted January 9 of sodomizing a former aide. It was the second time he had faced the same charge and the second time he said the criminal proceedings against him were politically motivated.

Anwar told the BBC when questioned about gay rights that Malaysia must "review some of these archaic laws."

He said Muslims and non-Muslims in Malaysia generally believe in the sanctity of marriage between a man and a woman.

"We do not promote homosexuality in the public sphere or domain," he said. "I don't think we make apologies towards that."

"But I think to use this legislation to be punitive to punish innocent people cannot be condoned or tolerated."

Anwar, who was initially convicted of the first sodomy charge he faced before the case was overturned, denied he ever hinted at decriminalizing homosexual acts.

Such a move is opposed also by his political allies, even if the acts are consensual.

'Should not treat them like garbage'

"If laws are repealed to accommodate homosexuality, it is downright unsuitable for our children and lifestyle," said Mahfodz Mohamad, vice-chief of PAS Dewan Ulama.

The debate has highlighted the difficulties gay men, lesbians, bisexuals and transgender people have in living openly in Malaysia.

"From the cultural and religious aspect, it's quite oppressive to the point that they are really ridiculed and sometimes to the point that people forget that they are humans and they have human rights," said Johann Tan, executive director of a local human rights group Pusat Komnas.

Tan said his office has been advocating for better understanding for the community.

"Human rights is colour-blind. Human rights is gender-blind," he said.

"If a certain religious body feels that they (gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgenders) are deviating from the teachings of God, they should engage them and try to bring them back to the fold.

"They should not treat them like garbage."

Nobody knows better the agony of growing up gay in Malaysia than Pang Khee Teik, 38, founder and spokesman of the Kuala Lumpur-based gay-rights organization Seksualiti Merdeka, which means Sexuality Independence.

Pang, an art director, said that before he came to be at peace with himself and his sexuality, he struggled for at least a decade against pressures from his family, gay friends and neighbours.

Easy weapon for politicians

"I had to spend 10 or 12 years of my life when I was younger trying to go straight," he said. "For 12 years, I was trying to stop myself from falling in love, from feeling anything, and it was very difficult years of my life. I felt terrible. I hated myself."

pang khee teikBut Pang (left) said he still considers himself lucky for liberating himself from the pressures of his family and society because he knows a lot of gay people who succumbed and entered into heterosexual relationships.

Pang said he pities most of the children that are now in the same predicament as he was, who were being bullied in school or were driven out of their homes by their parents in the hope that they would become straight.

As for the political debate surrounding gay rights, Pang said sex is an easy weapon for politicians to use to attack their rivals.

"Even the homophobia that is acted out by our politicians is politically motivated," he said. "They are hoping that by saying the right thing, they get more votes."

But Pang said he hoped that his organization would succeed in making people understand the lives and struggles of gay men, lesbians, bisexuals and transgenders.

"Other Malaysians are starting to realize that as human beings, we have a right to express ourselves," he said. "We have not broken any law.

"We believe it is completely within our rights, and this is protected by the constitution of Malaysia, to express ourselves."

- dpa