

'During the Anwar trial it was easy to get lucky'
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Mageswary Ramakrishnan

Ashley Lee is a 26-year-old Kuala Lumpur-based journalist and a prominent member of Malaysia's gay community. Lee attributes the Internet, new bars, and "cruising areas" for the rise in the number of people coming out as gay, and reveals the sodomy trial of Anwar Ibrahim (the country's former Deputy Prime Minister) even increased his own sex life. He spoke recently with TIME contributor Mageswary Ramakrishnan. Excerpts:

TIME: What is happening in the Malaysian gay community?

Lee: The gay community is growing. Many gay saunas and pubs have been opening up to cater to this increase. Gay men are also becoming more open about their sexuality. Gay cruising areas are also increasing -- there are a few dozen spots in Kuala Lumpur, alone.

TIME: What are cruising areas?

Lee: These are pickup areas where men meet other men and have sex with them.

TIME: What is your reaction to Anwar Ibrahim's nine-year jail sentence for sodomy?

Lee: During the Anwar trial it was easy to get lucky. After he was sacked my sex life escalated. Many people wanted to experiment with gay sex.

TIME: Has the Internet made a difference to the gay community?

Lee: We are all logged on to the Internet. We have chat lines catering to Malaysian gays. We have chat parties where we meet the people we have been chatting with.

TIME: Anal sex is a crime in Malaysia. Do you have problems with the police?

Lee: It is ironical but the authorities have left us alone so far. They know where the gay pubs are. They are aware of the pickup areas, but so far nothing has happened. I hope it stays that way.

TIME: Why do you think the authorities are turning a blind eye?

Lee: I think it's because we are not openly demanding recognition or holding gay parades.

TIME: Do you think Malaysia's sex laws should be changed?

Lee: Of course. Why can't they recognize that this involves two people who are in love. There is nothing wanton about it.

TIME: Do Malaysians in general accept homosexuality?

Lee: Most Malaysians think we are vulgar creatures only in relation to anal sex. I for one hate anal sex. I am talking about love here. I feel for another man and want to have a life with him. I hope people will stop seeing stereotypes and start seeing us human beings.

TIME: Do you think this will ever happen in Malaysia?

Lee: Yes, when the gay community has become really big. I believe that numbers will add to our strength. With a huge number of people we might be able to not only gain respect from society but perhaps even lobby for our rights.

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