

The Apartheid of Homosexuality

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"Homosexuals, Dogs, Smoking, Pants, Shorts, Slippers Are Not Allowed In This Restaurant." Sign on the door of an Italian restaurant in Taiwan. (Sydney Star Observer, 13 August 1998)

What do the Vice-President of Zambia, Christon Tembo, the Prime Minister of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe, the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Dr. Mahatir Mohamad, the President of the United States, Bill Clinton, the United Nations High Commissioner of Human Rights, Mrs Mary Robinson, Prime Minister of England, Tony Blair, Chairman of the Truth Commission and former Archbishop of South Africa, Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama, have in common? It certainly is not race, culture, politics or religion. It is the fact that each of them spoke about/to homosexuality in 1998.

The issues and problems facing homosexuals in the late 1990s are many and complex. More often than not, these issues and problems are serious, centred on the oppression and liberation of homosexuals, on their widespread marginalisation and invisibility. Former chairman of South Africa's Truth Commission, Desmond Tutu, considers homosexual "persecution as unjust as apartheid." Tutu continues "For me it's a matter of human rights and a deeply theological issue (Announce, 17 November 1998)." It is his second priority of concern after Third World poverty.

The issues and problems facing homosexuals are also experienced across culture, race, health, law, ethnicity, politics, religion and economics. For all kinds of reasons and in all kinds of ways, homosexuality has become a marker of the final years of the twentieth century. And it defies borders - it does not matter from which part of the world you take a look, whether in Asia or Africa, the Americas, Europe or the Middle East, homosexuality has currency at an international level not witnessed before.

For example, the trial of Anwar Ibrahim in Malaysia has brought up many of the issues that are found in Indonesia, Singapore and Australia. The former Deputy Prime Minister was detained in September 1998 under Malaysia's Internal Security Act and charged with, among other things, sodomy and homosexuality. In a Time interview that asked whether he was a homosexual, Anwar answered: "Definitely not. This is nothing but vile character assassination." Implicit in this answer are some of the key elements involved in relation to homosexuals and homosexuality in the world today. In Malaysia, homosexuality is illegal, enforced by laws that are inherited from its time as a British colony. The fact that Malaysia is also an Islamic nation proscribes homosexuality as a sin. Thus, homosexuality is doubly troubled. But it is actually troubled further. In 1992, the Prime Minister, Dr. Mahatir Mohamad made the statement that democracy would lead to homosexuality. This conflation of homosexuality with democracy was used by Dr. Mahatir to consolidate Malaysia's cultural borders (and its postcolonial status), to maintain the purity and uniqueness of the Malaysian people. In this context, Dr. Mahatir is drawing on cultural specificity

to delineate the indigenous from the foreign, and homosexuality is conceived of as alien and "other".

It is in this sense that Anwar Ibrahim is "othered" by the use of the accusation that he is homosexual. Anwar has been notable for his liberal views about democracy and transparent government (see his *The Asian Renaissance*, 1996). To simply do away with opposition and perceived threats to his authoritarian rule, Dr. Mahatir can inscribe upon his enemy the descriptor of "homosexual".

Prior to the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC) leader's summit in Kuala Lumpur in late 1998, amid the controversial jailing of Anwar and civil unrest and demonstrations, the role of homosexuality as a political and cultural tool of difference was propounded strongly by the Malaysian Foreign Minister, Dr. Abdullah Badawi. It was his contention that sodomy was a serious offence in Malaysia, "against the country's religious and social values (*The Weekend Australian*, 7-8 November 1998)." Dr. Badawi maintained that "In certain places - in Europe, perhaps Australia and America - they don't treat it as something big but to us it is bad, it is a scandal (quoted in above)."

Following Dr. Mahatir's accusations against Anwar, a People's Anti-Homosexual Voluntary Movement was formed to combat the "dangers of homosexuality." In one blow Dr. Mahatir succeeded in undermining Anwar's credibility and deployed homosexuality as the number one no-no. Anwar, also a Muslim, entrenched the perceived, corrupting value of homosexuality by asserting in the *Time* interview that his character was assassinated by this descriptor.

So this is one sense of where homosexuality is located in Southeast Asia today, something that is "demonised", and deeply troubled. It is conflated at once with democracy, corruption, and foreignness. As Carl Stychin states: "it does seem clear that when the nation state perceives a threat to its existence, that danger is frequently translated into sexualised terms. Same sex sexuality is deployed as the alien other, linked to conspiracy, recruitment, opposition to the nation, and ultimately a threat to civilization."

The murder in October 1998 of Matthew Shepherd, a 22-year-old student and human rights activist at the University of Wyoming in the United States highlights something that is happening all around the world but which remains largely unnoticed. Any examination of the situation of homosexuals anywhere in the world will reveal entrenched covert and overt homophobia: that is a fear and even hatred towards homosexuals. Homosexuality and homosexual identity are persistently demonized, usually for religious, political or cultural reasons.

In many parts of Africa too there is deeply entrenched homophobia and the rhetoric of "demonisation" is used persistently against homosexuality. Zambian Vice-President, Christon Tembo said in October 1998 that people championing the cause of homosexuals in the country risked being arrested. Gays and lesbians are perceived traitors of society, a sentiment shared vociferously by Robert Mugabe, Prime Minister of Zimbabwe (see for example "No Freedom for Gays In Mugabe's Zimbabwe," *Herald Tribune*, 16 July 1998). In a strange resonance to Malaysia, Zimbabwe's first president, Rev. Canaan Banana, was recently tried and convicted on charges of sodomy.

What is a homosexual to do in this context? What is to be done? How does she or he respond to the fact that in so many places around the world, homosexuality is constantly thrust forward as a demon in times of crisis or when there is some religious, political or cultural reason to do so? How does a homosexual respond to the fact that in March 1998 in Afghanistan five men were brutally crushed to death by a wall for committing sodomy? Or the sobering fact that according to Luiz Mott, author of *Epidemic of Hate*, a Brazilian homosexual is murdered every four days out of homophobic hatred? William Yang, an Australian gay activist has answered this by saying: "Being a gay man, you have to be politicised in some way, otherwise you're a walking victim." This is how the homosexual is activated. It is a response to implicit socio-legal, political, cultural and religious ostracisation and oppression.

Homophobia, or directed hatred against "other" sexualities, is utilised in the battle of cultural, religious and national purity. For many political leaders in Asia and Africa it is a postcolonial stance, a defense against the threat of perceived Western cultural imperialism brought to the non-Western world through technology and capital. Sexuality is seen as an element in the construction and imagining of cultural borders, a barrier constructed to preserve indigenusness. Homosexuality in this sense is regarded as a "globalised" Western virus that corrupts the local. However, there are in reality no borders when it comes to sexuality. The torture and murder of Matthew Shepherd illustrates the presence of hatred towards homosexuals exists in the heart of the world's most vocal and chauvinist democracy.

According to some commentators there is a global war against homosexuality (Melbourne Star Observer, 30 October 1998; also see "The War over Gays" issue of Time, 26 October 1998). It can be witnessed in conservative and reactionary attacks upon homosexuality in many cultures, including: the United States with fundamentalist Christian groups (for example, "Religious Right Launches A New Anti-Gay Crusade," Herald Tribune, 16 July 1998); in Fiji where the latest drafting of the constitution caused immense controversy because of the inclusion of sexual orientation as a basis for non-discrimination (it was later dropped); in China where gays are often detained in jail for social gatherings; in Romania where gays have been tortured. Whether in the developed or developing world, in Asia, Africa, Europe or South America, homosexual oppression and persecution is present.

The hard fact is that sexual cleansing is just as real as ethnic cleansing, only there is a silence about the former. The American, Nobel Prize winning author Toni Morrison has commented that "Race is the least reliable information you can have about someone. It's real information, but it tells you next to nothing (Time International, 19 January 1998)." Ethnic and sexual cleansing take place because of complex histories and traditions. It is not just about the colour of skin or the inflection of voice. It goes beyond stereotypes. These kinds of "cleansings" are bound up in questions of purity and dominance. It is all about cleansing the "other" wherever it is found. And it is about making the "other", in this case, the homosexual person, the so-called enemy of the state, the family and the individual. Borders are of no consequence. The "other" is within and without.

As we draw toward the beginning of the twenty first century there are many mixed messages for homosexual people. On a positive note, there are some signs that homosexuality is receiving much-needed attention on the international scene. In October 1998, for example, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mrs Mary Robinson, met with representatives of the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) to discuss the need to place homosexuality within the ambit

of the United Nations. Also in October 1998, in South Africa, which has the first constitution in the world that affirms equality for homosexuals, old apartheid laws that criminalized homosexuality were at last removed.

However, on the downside there is persistent homophobia and heterosexism in Western and non-Western cultures, which translates into the apartheid of homosexuality. Thus, coeval with an emerging gay and lesbian voice in most parts of the world there is a critical tension evident in anti-homosexual measures and rhetoric. Oliver Phillips in his analysis of this phenomenon in Zimbabwe concludes, "What is being more actively censured... is the identity of being lesbian or gay, for it is this identification of sexuality as signifying a social truth, and defining a particular lifestyle, which seems to carry the most significance."

This view can be applied to Indonesia, Singapore, Australia and other polities. As Ashok Row Kavi states: "We are truly international and we are truly a planetary minority. And yet, in large parts of Asia and Africa, we don't seem to exist. On an international level, there's a war being waged regarding gay and lesbian issues (Melbourne Star Observer, 30 October, 1998)." There is ample evidence of this "war" in recent studies, but more research needs to be done. Research has only just begun to reveal the extent of the apartheid of homosexuality.