

Colonizing African Values

*How the U.S. Christian Right is
Transforming Sexual Politics in Africa*

A PUBLICATION OF POLITICAL RESEARCH ASSOCIATES

BY KAPYA JOHN KAOMA

Executive Summary

When Uganda's parliament ended its session in May 2011 without passing the Anti-Homosexuality Bill levying the death penalty for "aggravated" homosexuality, human rights activists in Africa and around the world thought they had defeated the legislation, first proposed in October 2009. But parliamentarians reintroduced the "Kill the Gays" Bill in February 2012 with the same inhumane penalties, similar bills showed up in other countries, and anti-gay measures passed in Burundi in 2009, Malawi in 2010 and Nigeria in 2011.

The Uganda Anti-Homosexuality Bill of 2009 proved to be just the warning shot for growing attacks on LGBT—and reproductive—rights across the African continent.

Political Research Associates provided early warning of the campaigns in its 2009 report, "Globalizing the Culture Wars: U.S. Conservatives, African Churches, and Homophobia," and singled out the true instigators of the hateful legislation in Uganda: U.S. Christian Right figures including the internationally prominent Baptist pastor and bestselling author, Rick Warren; Scott Lively, the anti-gay, Holocaust revisionist; and Lou Engle, head of the revivalist group, The Call, and a leader in the right-wing New Apostolic Reformation movement. The world applauded when Warren, and later Lively, spoke out against the Ugandan bill.

But while these leaders backed off, key institutions of the U.S. Christian Right *stepped up* their efforts to bring their style of persecuting sexual minorities—and opposing reproductive rights—to the continent. Not only are they promoting legislation targeting LGBT people and abortion (a procedure that is already largely illegal), they are contributing to the atmosphere of intolerance that is resulting in "instances of harassment, discrimination, persecution, violence and murders committed against individuals because of their sexual orientation or gender identity," as Amnesty International has reported.¹

This report investigates how key U.S. Christian conservatives of various backgrounds—Roman Catholics and Mormons, as well as right-leaning evangelicals—are expanding the U.S. Christian Right infrastructure on the African continent with new institutions and campaigns that are reshaping national political dynamics and even laws based on an American template. Within the past five years, the Roman Catholic Human Life International (HLI), the Pat

Robertson-founded American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ-USA), and Family Watch International (FWI), led by a Mormon, have launched or expanded their work in Africa dedicated to promoting their Christian Right worldview. A loose network of right-wing charismatic Christians called the Transformation movement joins them in fanning the flames of the culture wars over homosexuality and abortion by backing prominent African campaigners and political leaders.

They build off of decades-old encounters of the U.S. Christian Right on the continent. That includes right-wing evangelical Pat Robertson's involvement with repressive former Liberian president—and war criminal—Charles Taylor and White-led apartheid governments during the Cold War, the deep penetration of his Christian Broadcasting Network and the Trinity Broadcasting Network into African homes, and Bible schools and universities founded and funded by conservative U.S. Christians.

We identified three reasons why these U.S. organizations and networks can be so influential with relatively modest outlays. First, white people and Americans continue to enjoy influence in Africa, in an echo of past colonial relationships, both because they are from powerful countries and because they have scarce money to spend. Second, these right-wing organizations and movements espouse charismatic and other conservative theologies that may not be mainstream in the United States, but resonate with many African Christians. The politicization and policy implementation of these theologies has translated into the persecution of sexual minorities and increased oppression of women through attempts to restrict reproductive freedoms. Third, the campaigners are successful in painting African campaigners for LGBT rights as dupes of neocolonial forces trying to impose an alien philosophy on the continent.

By hiring locals as office staff, ACLJ and HLI in particular hide an American-based agenda behind African faces, giving the Christian Right room to attack gender justice and LGBT rights as a neocolonial enterprise imposed on Africans and obstructing meaningful critique of the U.S. Right's activities.

On the parliamentary front, the groups aim to bring about a new legal infrastructure in Africa that enshrines their Christian Right worldview. These

infrastructure changes include constitutional reforms saying life begins at conception, expanding beyond colonial era “carnal knowledge” laws barring same sex relations, and blending Church and State—an incendiary goal when the Christians share the continent with Muslims and traditional religions. Bills banning same-sex marriage or adoption demonstrate an obvious American influence in countries where LGBT people do not yet have the right to exist much less marry or adopt. Similarly, U.S. conservatives support more regressive action against abortion, even though it is both largely illegal and fairly common. Since abortion is widely accepted as a personal matter, even when viewed as morally wrong, the Christian Right has thus far not secured a foothold in further undermining reproductive rights.

Among the groups’ recent activities in Africa:

- In an aggressive attempt to establish a new legal infrastructure on the African continent that reflects the U.S. Christian Right’s ideals, the Washington D.C.-based American Center for Law and Justice opened two Africa offices while Uganda was debating its anti-homosexuality bill in 2009 and 2010.

Named the East African Center for Law and Justice’s (EACLJ) in Kenya and the African Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ) in Zimbabwe, these U.S. institutions aim to lobby African parliaments “to take the Christian’s views into consideration as they draft legislation and policies.”²

In both African countries, we found the center uses influential evangelical African religious leaders to gain access to top political leadership. In Zimbabwe, the ACLJ is enlisting the government of homophobic autocrat Robert Mugabe as an ally, echoing the unscrupulous alliances Pat Robertson built in the 1980s with repressive apartheid and military governments to expand his influence on the continent.

During a constitutional reform battle in Kenya in 2010, the EACLJ succeeded in inserting “culture war” language saying life begins at conception in the approved draft, but critically failed to remove a woman’s ability to secure an abortion if her health is in danger. Similarly, they promoted language asserting marriage is between a man and a woman, but failed to remove language defending all people’s equal protection before the law.

- The conservative Catholic Human Life International spends one quarter of its overseas budget in sub-Saharan Africa and has aff-

iliates in Kenya, Malawi, South Africa, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe among other African countries.³ It campaigns against contraception, a popular practice in Africa, and mirrors anti-LGBT campaign tactics by claiming against evidence that birth control is a Western import. In a stark deviation from African culture, which considers violations of anti-abortion law a personal matter, Human Life International missionaries in Uganda turned in a clinician who performed an abortion for prosecution.

- Despite her marginal status in the United States and small budget, Sharon Slater of Family Watch International influences Africans with alarmist rhetoric that the United Nation’s population control strategy will destroy the African family—and that LGBT people are somehow to blame. “This manipulation of the UN system by individuals and organizations promoting their own sexual agenda and not the collective and unified agenda of all UN member states must cease,” Slater said in a 2010 speech to the United Nations. “All of this push for sexual rights undermines the institution of the family.”⁴ She is trying to harness Christian Right arguments that have demonized LGBT people to demonize reproductive rights, a tactic that must be challenged lest it take hold.

With a Christianity saturated with demons and the prosperity gospel (which claims that simple faith in Jesus Christ will bring wealth and well-being), Africa provides a receptive home for Christian Right movements that may be more marginal or a minority in the United States. Similarly, the embrace of reproduction as a virtue and childlessness as a tragedy in much of sub-Saharan Africa provides an opening for HLI and FWI’s promotion of “family values” and even claims that campaigns against overpopulation are a Western conspiracy to reduce African development. Finally, U.S. Christian Right influence adds a distinctly homophobic spin to an African cultural tradition open to viewing same-sex orientation as a sign of a respected ancestral spirit rather than a demon possession.

We found certain countries were more hospitable to U.S. Christian Right campaigners than others, in part because of ideological support from government officials. The presidents of Zambia, Zimbabwe, and Uganda themselves accused opposition parties of promoting homosexuality to undercut their influence and cater to powerful African religious conservatives. The nephew of Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni, Joseph Okia, leads the east African wing of the International Transformation Network, which sees LGBT people as literally embodying demons. Malawi, by contrast, has become a less hospitable home to the Christian Right since its new president, Joyce

Banda, supported decriminalizing same-sex relations in the spring of 2012. But it is also the site of renewed efforts to dislodge her.

Win or lose, these campaigns have triggered a rise in militant homophobia and anti-gay violence across much of sub-Saharan Africa and have reshaped national debates. Perhaps the most notorious instance of violent homophobia occurred in January 2011 when David Kato, an advocacy officer for the group Sexual Minorities Uganda, was found bludgeoned to death in his Kampala home. Kato had received death threats in the months before his killing, after a local newspaper *Rolling Stone* published his photo alongside a cover story charging that homosexuals recruit children. Kato's name and home address, along with Uganda's other "top homos," were listed in the article.

Thinly organized with little societal support or financial backing and effectively no government protections, the African LGBT community's main concern is survival. Yet human rights activists find their efforts to support this targeted community—and to forestall attacks on abortion—immensely challenging. African allies of the U.S. Christian Right echo their friends in deriding African and Western human rights campaigners as pursuing a neocolonial agenda. To better support the communities, allies around the world need to be more attuned to the complexity of theological and institutional ties between Africa and the U.S. Christian Right that this report exposes.

Recommendations

Our research suggests the following actions can help support LGBT people in sub-Saharan Africa and forestall campaigns against women's reproductive rights that stem from U.S. Christian Right influence.

1. Confront the myth that human rights advocacy is Western neocolonialism

The U.S. Christian Right and its African allies charge that human rights activists are neocolonialists out to destroy Africa through the imposition of Western gender norms and policies. This myth is fueled by deep seated suspicion regarding Western powers and their motives. We can challenge this myth by exposing the *Americanness* of the recent politicization of homosexuality and abortion in Africa.

2. Respect and follow the leadership of African human rights promoters

We must practice principled solidarity with African human rights promoters. Human rights advocates in the West can and should provide increased educational, financial, media, and other resources that better enable African social justice voices to be heard above the din of U.S. right-wing campaigns that demonize sexual minorities.

3. Tell Africans what the U.S. Christian Right really stands for

The U.S. culture wars are still not understood in African circles. While some tendencies within African Christianity share charismatic beliefs with U.S. Christian Right campaigners, the African Church in general is more social-justice-oriented and concerned about the poor and the disenfranchised. Human rights advocates must expose the U.S. Christian Right's opposition to social justice initiatives in the United States—and their historic alignment with White supremacist and repressive regimes in Africa.

4. Support the visibility of LGBT Africans as a means of curbing homophobia

Many African sexual minorities exist at the margins of society, invisible and vulnerable. Broader visibility will enable their *Africanness* and humanity to become more broadly evident. Human rights advocates can assist by establishing educational opportunities for African LGBT activists in their home countries and abroad. Such support can assist Africans in maintaining leadership over their own human rights struggle.

5. Support African leaders who courageously stand for human rights

Africans politicians and religious leaders—such as Malawian president Joyce Banda and Ugandan Bishop Christopher Ssenyonjo—who have stood up for human rights need the support of international social justice advocates. While many Westerners will understandably fear being labeled "neocolonialist" for any public expression of solidarity, we must stand with—and aid—those defending human rights principles.

6. Put meaningful pressure on African political leadership to respect human rights

African politicians have the power to resist and reverse the persecution of LGBT persons—President Joyce Banda's stance on decriminalization of LGBT persons in Malawi showcases this. But bold statements coupled with equivocal action by Western politicians can prove counter-productive; public pronouncements can easily be characterized as Western bullying by African press and politicians. Western governments have the tendency to make threats that they do not enforce—this is unproductive and unhelpful.

7. Engage African diplomatic missions on issues of Human Rights

Establishing direct relationships with African diplomats associated with the United Nations

and other African embassies will help dispel the rumors that U.S. human rights activists are out to recolonize Africa. This direct contact can counter the false information presented by various Christian Right groups and figures.

⁴ “Sharon Slater’s Speech to the UN Commission on Population and Development, April 14, 2010,” Family Watch International: Promoting Family Based Solutions to World Problems, www.familywatchinternational.org/fwi/sharon.

8. Rally Against Bigotry Across Ecumenical Lines

Christian groups need to step up and cross denominational lines to challenge the Roman Catholic Right. They must extend their ecumenical alliances beyond their challenge to rightwing evangelicals. All Americans must continue challenging Christian Right organizations at home—exposing their unpalatable work in Africa and compelling organizations, individuals, and religious hierarchy to distance themselves from their African allies and actions.

9. Demonstrate Respect for Religion

Africa is a deeply religious continent. U.S. Conservatives regularly present human rights activists as godless liberals, with no respect for religion. This perception needs to be challenged and changed. Religious-based human rights groups and leaders can play a vital role in defending sexual minorities and women by locating their commitments in sacred scriptures. Secular advocates should take care not to degrade the Bible, the Quran, or faith traditions more generally when challenging religious justifications for denying human rights.

10. Build Infrastructure for the Long Term

The Christian Right is committed to a long-term strategy to influence human rights policies in Africa. Western and African human rights activists must keep sight of their mutual long-term strategies of meeting universal human rights goals. Human rights struggles in Africa, as elsewhere, require powerful infrastructures for leadership development, mobilization, and communications.

¹ “Africa: End discrimination against LGBTI on international day against homophobia.” Amnesty International (May 16, 2010). <http://amnesty.org/en/news/africa-end-discrimination-against-gays-international-day-against-homophobia-2012-05-16>.

² “About Us.” EACLJ.org. <http://www.eaclj.org/about-us.html>.

³ “Mission Field: English-Speaking Africa,” Human Life International. <http://www.hli.org/index.php/mission-field/english-speaking-africa>; “Mission Field: Francophone (French-Speaking) Africa,” Human Life International. <http://www.hli.org/index.php/mission-field/francophone-africa>

About the Publisher

Political Research Associates (PRA) is a progressive think tank devoted to supporting movements that are building a more just and inclusive democratic society. We expose movements, institutions, and ideologies that undermine human rights. Political Research Associates seeks to advance progressive thinking and action by providing research-based information, analysis, and referrals.



Political Research Associates
1310 Broadway, Suite 201
Somerville, MA 02144-1837

Voice: 617.666.5300

Fax: 617.666.6622

www.publiceye.org