

# Threats and Survival: The Religious Right and LGBT Strategies in Muslim Contexts



photo by T. Shah

by Anissa Hélie

**A**t the turn of the nineteenth century, Europeans referred to same-sex relationships as the “Persian disease,” the “Turkish disease,” or the “Egyptian vice.” In an interesting reversal, many conservative voices in Muslim contexts nowadays attribute homosexuality to “Western depravation”—and call for sanctions.

This shift in homophobic discourse demonstrates that the construction of “sexual difference” may vary significantly, shaped as it is by historical and political considerations. It used to echo advocates of

colonialism, who sought justification for imperialist expansion in “native” perversions. Now, it serves the interests of the Muslim Religious Right, which (selectively) denounces globalisation as a source of social evils to better silence alternative opposition.

Sustained pressure by feminist and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) activists has succeeded in bringing the issue of “sexual diversity” to the forefront. Yet the recent past is marked by both landmark achievements and worrying

trends. This paper explores the last decade—from the early 1990s onwards—and recalls some of the gains made at the global level. It also examines how these gains are currently threatened by the strengthening of the Religious Right. While the focus is specifically on Muslim contexts, Muslim fundamentalists' efforts need to be located alongside those of their not-so-strange bedfellows, such as the Vatican and the Christian Right.

### **The long, winding road to emancipation**

One major global trend emerging from the current situation has actually been positive: sexual diversity is no longer invisible. Legislators have started protecting the rights of sexual minorities—at least on paper. In recent years, South Africa and Ecuador became the first countries to expand the basis for discrimination to include sexual orientation, and to incorporate anti-discrimination provisions in their Constitutions (New Internationalist, 2001).

However ambivalent one might feel about the inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) personnel in the military or about the struggle for “gay marriages,” it is still a measure of equality that several countries now recognise same-sex couples' civil partnerships. Although these countries are overwhelmingly Western, activists in Vietnam and Mexico are lobbying for similar changes.<sup>1</sup>

Medical authorities had to give in too: in 1992, homosexuality ceased to be listed as a disease by the World Health Organisation (WHO). However,

transsexuality remains stigmatised through the diagnosis of gender identity disorder (GID), which is still considered a mental illness today.

Activists were also successful in their efforts to broaden the human rights agenda so that it began to address various violations faced by LGBTI people. Mainstream human rights organisations took note—since 1991, Amnesty International's mandate includes the protection of individuals persecuted on the grounds of their sexual orientation. Though established only a few years ago, the Human Rights Watch now has a dynamic LGBTI programme.

Issues of sexual rights and sexual autonomy have caught the attention of institutions like the United Nations (UN), particularly since the international world conferences of the nineties.<sup>2</sup> In an unprecedented move, in 2001, no less than six independent UN experts and Special Rapporteurs issued a joint statement urging activists in LGBT circles to assist with documenting violations.

Such international developments could not have been achieved without the dedication of countless advocates, nor without the feminist and LGBTI organising that has taken place over the last decades—locally, nationally and regionally. But while LGBTI legal rights slowly become more socially acceptable, the discrimination and persecution have not disappeared—far from it. Although LGBTI people's visibility is on the rise in many parts of the world, the discourses of religious extremism are also increasingly powerful. The growing influence of the Religious

Right constitutes another major trend in the global arena.

### **Beaten by backlash?**

Homophobia remains state sanctioned in too many countries (Hélie, 2004), and the voices (and deeds) of “fundamentalist” extremists are instrumental in maintaining the status quo. At the local level, they also help provide legitimacy to those—state and non-state actors alike—committing human rights violations against LGBTI people. At the national and international levels, the Religious Right influences and shapes political agendas.

Manipulating deeply held notions of cultural identity is an effective strategy. The Religious Right (whether Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, etc.) would like us to believe that it promotes a return to “traditional values,” to the “fundamentals” of one’s faith. Rather, leaders of politico-religious movements promote conservative, highly selective interpretations of religion and identity in order to gain or maintain political power. The “traditions” invoked refer to a “pure” and ahistorical past, devoid

of any trace of diversity (diversity of ethnic groups, of religious beliefs, sexual orientation, customary practices, or class are simply erased). The mythical “values” promoted are, in fact, those of nationalism, xenophobia, sexism, and homophobia. Therefore, it is not surprising that women, minorities, and LGBTI people are most vulnerable to fundamentalist right wing politics.

The January 2006 case of two LGBT groups being denied Consultative Status at the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) provides a striking example of coalition-building between the Christian and the Muslim Religious Rights at the UN level.<sup>3</sup> When else are Iran and the US walking side by side? But the anti-gay stance is a battle each faction fights on its own turf as well. For example, Pope Benedict XVI recently denounced gay marriages as “a grave error.” In November 2005, he also approved a ruling barring homosexuals from priesthood, launching a witch-hunt within seminaries.<sup>4</sup>

In Nigeria, the invocation of “indigenous values” allows for a framing of sexual differences of which the Pope would surely approve. As of January 2006, the government is discussing a bill that makes same-sex relationships and marriages illegal. Justice Minister Bayo Ojo stressed that offenders would face jail sentence, and justified the move stating, “It is un-African and the Holy books prohibit it.”<sup>5</sup> Nigerian activists warn that advocacy work has de facto become a punishable offence and that the bill invites “widespread human rights violations of people suspected to be gay or working for gay rights.”

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A piece written à propos of last year's banning of the *Vagina Monologues* in Uganda confronts religious zealots with eloquent arguments that could also apply to Nigeria: "How can one talk of

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'African cultural and moral values' in a continent that has tens of thousands of different ethnic and linguistic groups? What is 'un-African' about casual reference to the vagina when Karimojong and Dinka women walk freely naked and squat before their children exposing their vaginas? What is 'un-African' about homosexuality when... 'homosexuality was not only a condoned but also an actively encouraged' practice among young males among the Bahima peoples of Ankole?" (Mwendo, 2005).

### Fighting faggots and feminists

In Muslim contexts—among others—conservative leaders use (homo)sexuality in various ways. For example, it can effectively divert public attention from crucial domestic issues: the recent trial of 52 Egyptian alleged gay men has helped focus the public eye on another issue other than the ongoing economic recession. It is also handy in dismissing opponents:

former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed imprisoned his main political rival Anwar Ibrahim on sodomy charges. Finally, it helps discredit any voice of dissent: in Tunisia in 1998, the government-controlled media challenged six feminist leaders regarding their marital status. The same women (from the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women, ATFD) were later accused of "undermining Islam as well as cultural and social values" (Rothschild, 2005, pp. 27-28). In May 1999, similar arguments were used by the Punjab Minister for Social Welfare to discredit Shirkat Gah, a Pakistani women's collective accused of "promoting a culture of adultery" and being "responsible for the degeneration of society."

As the examples from Tunisia and Pakistan demonstrate, extremist politico-religious leaders resort to similar rhetoric when mobilising against women's rights and LGBTI advocates.

The first argument is that homosexuality (or feminism) simply does not exist in Muslim countries. In March 1997, a university professor was dismissed because she had mentioned—in a *private* conversation with a student—her belief that there were lesbians in Kuwait. The female president of Kuwait University, who fired her, insisted, "Ours is a Muslim society and homosexuality is against Islam" (AHBAB, 1996-1997).

Next comes the claim that women's (or LGBTI people's) demands for equality are products of a foreign ideology, and should be rejected on that ground. LGBTI activists and feminists are systematically accused of being agents of a corrupted foreign power;

hence, labeled a threat to the social order, to cultural purity as well as traitors to their nation, community, or faith. (Indeed, this is an argument used far beyond predominantly Muslim contexts, from India to China or Serbia.)

Finally, it is made clear that sexuality and women's rights cannot—ever—be a priority. Such issues are not meant to be on the agenda (*any* agenda): aren't they, ultimately, a luxury of the elites, whether foreign or local? At the 1995 Beijing Conference, attempts to introduce any reference to sexual orientation in the final document were

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obstructed by many Muslim states (as well as their Catholic allies); including Sudan, whose delegate insisted that: "This is something unnatural. The majority of women in the world are expecting us to deal with poverty and disease. We object to the presence of this term. This is a refusal, not a reservation."

In fact, women are especially vulnerable to growing fundamentalism, indeed primary targets. As Radhika Coomaraswamy, former Special Rapporteur on Violence Against

Women, explains: "Communities police women's behaviour. A woman who is perceived as acting in a sexually inadequate manner according to her community's standards will be punished." This is particularly true for lesbians and trans people in Muslim contexts, who are often at risk of persecution by non-state actors (including extremist politico-religious groups or their own relatives). A testimony from Jordan highlights this reality: "Very strong prejudices exist in Jordanian society, that are stronger than any legal prohibition. Lesbians are afraid of becoming visible.... The cornerstone of social support in Jordan is the family unit—but in the case of a lesbian who would be open about her sexuality, it may well be her own family that can become guilty of violations against her" (Assfar, 2000, pp. 283-284). Turkish trans activist Demir Demet can also testify to the repeated assaults she faces from police forces.

### **Activism, dissidence, and resistance back home**

Despite these repercussions, people fight back under the most oppressive circumstances. Because strategies are adapted to specific environments, there is a need to at least distinguish between those developed in Muslim countries and in the West (this already being an oversimplification).

LGBTI people located in predominantly Muslim contexts have begun organising relatively recently (some early birds started in the beginning of the nineties). Speaking out publicly takes a bit longer,

particularly for those from within socially and politically repressive societies. Sometimes, it is blatant discrimination that triggers resistance. However, the strategy of reclaiming public space requires not only seasoned risk assessment but also courage strengthened over the long term. For example, Lambda Istanbul, although active since 1993, organised its first Pride March in the Turkish capital a decade later—and at that time only 50 pioneers dared join.

Visibility often carries a high price, from humiliation and accusations of betrayal to actual instances of violence, forced HIV testings, rapes, and even murders. Lesbian activism is even more of a challenge, but some are paving the way, such as newcomer Aswat in Palestine (whose future will be further endangered by the recent Hamas election victory).

Despite the risks, support groups are now sprouting, although some still cannot operate openly. Over the last few years, Muslim LGBTI people are getting together in places as diverse as Morocco, Indonesia, Turkey,

*Pakistani man, who offered workshops on gender identity (with a welcomed feminist perspective) at the Al Fatiha conference, joins the Pride March in San Francisco, June 2001.*

Malaysia, Jordan, Lebanon, Jerusalem, South Africa, Nigeria, Palestine, Dubai, or Saudi Arabia as well as in countries with large indigenous Muslim communities like India. Breaking isolation is the main priority. This is not a minor achievement when the majority of newcomers to a Muslim LGBTI gathering share their amazement at being able to meet people “like them”: “I always thought I was the only one like that.” In countries where being outed as a non-heterosexual is dangerous, people are reaching out to other LGBTIs via the Internet. While often a tool of the privileged, it does



photo by A. Hélie

nevertheless provide a channel for exchange and solidarity (which can also be risky, depending on police monitoring).

Interestingly, the most repressive regimes are not necessarily the worst as far as expression of gender identity is concerned. Transsexuals in Jordan and Iran seem to be able to turn the strict gender binary division of society to their advantage,<sup>6</sup> with some individuals actually getting support (including financial support) from fundamentalist clerics for sex change operations (McDowall, 2004).

### **Activism, dissidence, and resistance— Surviving as the Other**

For LGBTI people in the West, it might be easier to organise openly, but there are also specific difficulties to face. Acceptance by Muslim communities generally presents a challenge, particularly as older members of migrant communities might cling to values dating back from when they left their country of origin, while in fact these societies have changed in the meantime. This tendency is almost certainly encouraged by most community leaders (always male, and often conservative), who may well find that this helps their own authority to remain unchallenged. In addition, the very real issue posed by one's complex identity, particularly in contexts far too often marked by racism, is not conducive to examining critically one's own community. Furthermore, racism, stigmatisation, and isolation can lead some disenfranchised youth to become easy prey for the local fundamentalist brotherhood.

Acceptance by non-Muslim LGBTI groups is not a given either, even if one is deeply secular and only identifies as culturally Muslim. Often faced with a mixture of naive orientalism, paternalism, and Islam stereotyping, many stress that "it is almost as hard to come out as a gay in the Muslim community than it is to come out as Muslim in a gay group."

Maybe as a result of this dual challenge, a number of specifically LGBTI Muslim groups are forming or further expanding in Europe and the Americas. These groups can be strictly faith-based or open to "LGBT Muslims and their friends"; they might focus on social gatherings or on political campaigning, or propose a mixture of activities; they might welcome people from a given ethnic/regional background or invite all willing souls. Strikingly, many such groups point at the contradiction that many individuals do struggle with—but which mostly mirrors society's discriminatory glance: "Being both queer and Arab is not easy in a world that discriminates against both" (AHBAB); "Gay and Muslim: Am I an Oxymoron?" (Al fatiha).<sup>7</sup> Names such as *Sawasiyah* ("Equal" in Arabic) also state from the outset a desire for recognition and respect. The team behind a recent documentary on the lesbian and gay Middle Eastern community in the US simply—yet very powerfully—states, "I Exist" (Eyebite Productions, 2002).

Experiencing the need for "a room of one's own," women also embark on setting up women-only groups. For example, Bint el Nas devotes its website to "women who identify as LGBT and/or queer and who are

identified ethnically and culturally with the Arab world”; they pledge “optimistic subversion” and seek to offer “a space to create something new: images of queer Arab women.” Assal (“honey” in Farsi) is a lesbian group based in the United States (both on the East and West Coasts), mostly functioning as a social support group. In the United Kingdom, the Safra-Project has grown since its birth in 2001, launching its website in 2003 and carrying research (especially with regards to service providers and how they can better accommodate the needs of lesbian, bisexual, and transgender [LBT] women) as well as organising meetings and asserting its presence in the media.

### Collective strategies

The emphasis here is on activist organising from within Muslim countries and communities, as opposed to more structured efforts of

non-government organisations (NGOs) that are often based “abroad.” But this is not to suggest that the latter should in any way be dismissed. Indeed, linking to these structures and cultivating alliances with individuals in their midst is a valuable form of networking. Their relative prosperity also contribute to LGBTI’s global visibility: from timely mass faxing to fact-finding missions to holding international gatherings. Queer Muslims continue to benefit from the support of such allies. For example, in 2000, the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC) organised the symposium “Separation of Faith and Hate: Sexual Diversity, Religious Intolerance and Strategies for Change.”<sup>8</sup> And the gay men jailed in Cairo are not entirely forgotten, thanks in part to documenting and advocacy work undertaken by Human Rights Watch.

*Activists at the World Social Forum in Mumbai (January 2004) put sexual rights on the agenda.*



photo by A. Hélie

Strategies are designed or adapted according to existing political and social contexts. The diversity of strategies reflects the diversity itself of Muslim contexts: living in Saudi Arabia (where one can be sentenced to death on the ground of homosexuality) has different consequences than living in Mombassa, Kenya (where same sex relationships can flourish: for example, two women sharing a household is comparatively acceptable). The following is an examination of some general trends.



### **Herstory, History and H\*story**

As do many oppressed and marginalised groups, queer Muslims attempt to reclaim their past. Identifying one's own "roots" is crucial both in terms of building a collective identity and in terms of asserting one's historical legitimacy. A number of LGBTI people are therefore engaged in the search for a more inclusive "tradition" than what is promoted by politico-religious

The Qu'ran is being examined by gay or gay-friendly theologians and believers in order to break the monopoly of male homophobic interpretation.

groups. They are looking for a past that acknowledges the existence of otherwise silenced minorities. While many traces of "indigenous" homosexual practices/ homoeroticism have been erased from mainstream history, examples can still be found.

In the twelfth century, a male scholar referring to the elites of the Muslim empires (that run from Syria to Morocco at the time) noted in a Medical Treatise published in Baghdad: "There are also women who are more intelligent than the others. They possess many of the ways of men, so they resemble to (*sic*) them even in their movements, the manner

in which they talk, and their voice (...) This makes it difficult for her (*sic*) to submit to the wishes of men and bring her (*sic*) to lesbian love. Most of the women with these characteristics are to be found among the educated and the elegant women, the scribes, Koran readers and female scholars."<sup>9</sup>

To counter the myth of homosexuality being a foreign/ imported ideology, other groups and individuals are engaged in reclaiming homoerotic literature such as Sufi poet Jalaludin Rimu or the Ottoman "*divan* literature." Still others are involved in re-examining religious texts. The Qu'ran is being examined by gay or gay-friendly theologians, and believers in order to break the monopoly of male homophobic interpretation.

### **Expanding political spaces and building alliances**

Many Muslim countries are subjected to rather authoritarian rule, a context which in itself tends to limit the possibilities for LGBTI equality. Nevertheless, when progressive civil society gains space, queer Muslims (who might well have been part of pro-democracy efforts) are taking advantage of newly opened arenas in which to voice their specific concerns. For example, in 1999, the coordinator of an Indonesian national gay rights group noted that the fall of dictator Suharto had an impact on queer people's visibility: "More people are coming out to their friends, writing in the media about gays and lesbian issues, even if under pseudonyms."



photo by A. Hélie

*Queer women assert their rights to equality and sexuality at the 2004 World Social Forum in Mumbai, India.*

Collaboration with like-minded groups is also a promising strategy. Coalition-building with other faith-based groups, or on an identity basis, allows for fruitful exchange of strategies and mutual support. As homophobic and conservative politico-religious leaders of various faiths invest in international alliances, so do people working for the advancement of LGBTI rights.

One example of faith-based initiatives, among many other examples, is the loose yet sustained relationship that a Quaker gay support group had built with the local UK Al-Fatiha chapter (now Imaan).<sup>2</sup> Sexual identity-based initiatives include, for example, the

National Religious Leadership Roundtable which, in the US context, represents “leaders of over 40 faith-based organisations including Muslim, Hindu, Catholic, Jewish, Protestant, Mormon, Black Church, and other religious and spiritual traditions, in partnership with other justice-seeking groups.” In 2001, it issued a joint statement condemning “conversion” therapy and affirming that “gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) individuals are an intentional and blessed part of Creation. Therapies to ‘convert’ or ‘repair’ a person’s orientation are misguided and should end. Such therapies deny the inherent holiness of GLB people.”

Another example is Larzish, the first film festival devoted to “sexuality and gender plurality” to take place in India. In 2003 and 2004, it brought together in Mumbai hundreds of queers from Hindu, Sikh, Muslim, Christian, and secular backgrounds. In addition, loose networks of activists collaborate internationally, especially around exchange of expertise in asylum cases.

As Muslim LGBTI movements develop, they are also more likely to be involved in collaborating with institutions. In 2000 for example, Al Fatiha UK was officially contacted by a police liaison officer, keen on documenting marriages imposed onto lesbians and gays. This opportunity might provide a way to tackle one major challenge: ensuring the accountability of states as well as non-state actors responsible for violations of LGBTI people’s human rights.

### **Broadening the western concept of "homosexuality"**

One is often, implicitly or explicitly, asked to fit into one of the following frames: homo/hetero/bi. Trans and intersex activists have complicated the equation by adding gender identity to the sexual orientation picture—but, more often than not, individuals are still expected to “tick one box only.” Still, we seem to always conveniently forget celibates, who also very much challenge both heteronormativity and compulsory sexuality.

Overall, existing categories can render invisible other conceptions of sexual/gender identity, and also do not acknowledge that sexual expression might be fluid throughout one’s lifetime. For example, among Swahili Muslims of Mombassa in Kenya, “men and women shift over a lifetime between homosexuality

and relationships people experience. For example, in the Sindh province of Pakistan, three words refer to a female friend: these distinguish between a “friend,” a “close friend,” and a “loving/physical relationship.” These categories can be seen as potential evidence of homoerotic behaviour, but it also reminds us that the “gay” concept and label does not necessarily always fit.

Reference to LGBTI is politically useful for coalition-building, lobbying and organising purposes because it brings together diverse people under a common umbrella. But it also excludes others who, although they engage in homoeroticism, do not identify as lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB). It also makes power structures rather invisible.

Building an LGBTI movement—in Muslim contexts as elsewhere—is not devoid of pitfalls. Indeed, class, caste, income, physical ability, health status, generation (youth/elders), ethnicity, and other factors continue to affect access to leadership positions, and to plain power. Above all, challenging norms associated with mainstream gender roles and gender identity does not necessarily bring about a challenge of gender hierarchies. It should therefore come as no surprise that many self-styled “LGBTI” groups are in fact dominated by gay men (some being truly blind about the privileges that masculinity, even alternative masculinity, affords them). The status of bisexuals, of intersex and trans persons and—let us not forget—of celibates, is still fragile within our movements.

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Fixed categories...seem too narrow to fully express the range of feelings and relationships people experience.

and heterosexuality. Lesbians and homosexuals are open about their behaviour. There are well-established rules for fitting them into everyday life.”

Fixed categories also seem too narrow to fully express the range of feelings

## It's up to us

There is a crucial need to be more inclusive of all LGBTI people. This requires a political awareness that can only come from an acknowledgement of the complexity within our lives. We can learn from feminist analysis and expand the reach of bell hooks' statement that "there is no language that can articulate what it is to be penalised by one's gender, even as one is privileged by one's race and class" (Childers & hooks, 1990).

Collective strategies are the most difficult to put into place, but they

are also the ones more likely to bring about change. Substantial gains can come from solidarity—real solidarity, like the one that bites and sings between the words of aboriginal activist Lilla Watson:

"If you came to help me,

You are wasting your time

And mine

But if you have come because your liberation is bound with mine,

Let us work together." ☺

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**Endnotes**

1 South Africa has actually endorsed same-sex unions since December 2005. The Mexican concept is innovative as it seeks legal recognition of any type of shared households, no matter on which basis (sexual or otherwise) relationships are based.

2 These began with the 1994 Cairo "International Conference on Population and Development" and the 1995 Beijing "Fourth World Conference on Women."

3 In January 2006, the applications submitted by the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) and the Danish Association of Gays and Lesbians (LBL) to obtain consultative status were denied. An ILGA press release (January 27) stated that Egypt and the Organization of Islamic Conference called on the United Nations (UN) to reject the two gay groups' applications without a hearing (contrary to the Economic and Social Council's normal procedure). The United States (US) voted alongside Iran, Pakistan, and Sudan to reject the ILGA and LBL applications, denying them a hearing.

4 The ruling concerns "anyone who has engaged in homosexual activity or has strong homosexual inclinations." The restriction apparently apply to those who have not been sexually active for a decade or more. NY Times, September 15, 2005, "Vatican to Check US Seminaries on Gay Presence."

5 <[allafrica.com/stories/20061190620.html](http://allafrica.com/stories/20061190620.html)>, January 18, 2006; Same-sex unions were prompted by their recent recognition in South Africa. In Nigeria, the jail sentence can now be up to five years.

6 This is not to say that homosexual conduct is made easy: in Iran, it is defined as an offense carrying the death penalty. In the summer and winter of 2005, several public executions of male teenagers took place, allegedly because of their sexual orientation.

7 Al Fatiba is the pioneer gay Muslim organisation in the US, which has since expanded into a multi-city chapters network and now has an international reach.

8 The International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission's gathering brought about two dozen sexual rights advocates and faith leaders from different regions. We issued a common declaration that started as follows: "We, people of diverse sexuality and spiritual, religious and secular communities, come together from around the world. We issue a call for solidarity to end religiously motivated and perpetrated intolerance based on sexual orientation, gender identity, or HIV status."

9 Haddad (a.k.a. Abu Nasr al Isra'ili). (2005). *Ktab nuzhat al-ashab fi mu'asarat al-ahbab fi'ilm albah*, Part 1, paragraphs 6-8). Cited in Wiebke Walther, *Woman in Islam*, (Montclair, NJ, Abner Schram: 1981), 118. In F. Shabeeb, *Great Ancestors*, Narratives Section, p.17. *Labore: Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML) & Shirkat Gab.*