



A young Egyptian protestor, part of the unfolding Middle Eastern revolution. It's unclear yet whether LGBT people will benefit from political reform in the region.

WINDS OF CHANGE

A democratic movement is sweeping across North Africa and the Middle East, but it's still unclear exactly what it will bring for gays in the region.

In 2009 Shiite militias rounded up, tortured and killed many “suspected gay men” in Iraq, an incident that was far from isolated; in 2010 a Saudi man was sentenced to 500 lashes and a five-year prison term for having sex with another man; in February this year police in Bahrain raided a “gay party” and arrested close to 200 people, 52 of whom are still in custody; in Turkey over the past two years more than a dozen transgender people have been murdered, with no charges laid in the majority of cases.

This is the Arab world, one of the worst places on the planet to be gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. As the international community watches the tidal wave of revolution and revolt that is sweeping across the region, toppling dictators and bringing democratic reforms, the big question for our community is, how will this affect LGBT people living there? Their lives have not been particularly good under the autocratic regimes they've endured for decades, but is democracy going to bring any improvement?

IceQueer (obviously not his real name) is a gay blogger and medical intern who was in Egypt's Tahrir Square during the protests earlier this year that saw president Hosni Mubarak driven from power. “It felt amazingly peaceful and cheerful,” he enthuses. “I love how diverse yet finally united Egypt is! I was holding a sign saying ‘secular’ in Arabic, English and French. We were all chanting that

this protest is for the people and not for any party or religion.”

The chant of the protesters was “freedom, social justice and democracy” but it's unclear yet how much of those will be given to the gay community. IceQueer is realistic about the chances of that happening in the short term. “You can't ask for lots of changes that have different effects on people,” he says. “Already asking for freedom and the fall of the regime bedazzled the whole country and its people, so imagine what would happen if we asked for LGBT rights? I believe Egypt's LGBT community can only have its rights when Egypt becomes a real secular country.”

There's still a long way to go to achieving that. IceQueer is out to his family and closest friends, but he has to be careful who else knows. There is no direct law prohibiting same-sex acts or relationships but the authorities still charge people under the Debauchery, Public Morals And Order statutes. “Most policemen play around a lot with words and the bugs in Egyptian law. They usually trap suspects by using words like debauchery when they ask them whether they practice same-sex sex or not, so they make suspects admit they practice ‘debauchery.’”

Of course, the situation could be a whole lot worse. Being gay in Egypt isn't nearly as difficult – or life-threatening – as it is in devoutly Islamist countries like Iran and

Saudi Arabia where the death sentence remains in place. During Egypt's revolution a lot of commentators spoke about the threat of the Muslim Brotherhood, an avowedly homophobic Islamist group, gaining greater influence. However, IceQueer plays down that possibility. "I don't think the Muslim Brotherhood would have such an influence that would affect the majority of Egyptians."

Closely watching the entire region from his office in New York is Hossein Alizadeh, the Middle East and North Africa program coordinator for the International Gay And Lesbian Human Rights Commission. The group was formed in 1990 and is dedicated to promoting equal treatment and respect for human rights, regardless of sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Originally from Iran, Hossein says the area he oversees is one of the world's most hostile regions for gays. "In most countries in the region, various combinations of sodomy laws, religious beliefs and cultural homophobia have oppressed the LGBT community and prevented them from openly and freely participating in social activities."

Even in those countries with no sodomy law, such as Egypt, Jordan and Iraq, morality laws are used to punish, harass and intimidate gays. "Apart from legal discrimination and abuse, the LGBT people also face domestic violence, especially by their family members. Honour crime, including honour killing, is common

frustration and hatred for the status quo," Hossein says. "These revolutions are led by angry people who are tired of corruption, poverty and oppression, but those people do not have a platform for change. All they know is that the current situation is no longer acceptable."

The demands of the protestors – freedom of expression and assembly, democratic governance, redistribution of resources and government accountability – are all positive steps that Hossein is confident, if fully implemented, will benefit all citizens, including those who are gay. "But at the same time," he adds, "the kind of demands the protestors are looking for indicates the population is not particularly concerned about gender equality, sexual rights and the rights of marginalised groups such as gay people."

A number of the many commentators talking about the Middle East right now seem to view democracy as an end in itself, as if all problems will eventually be solved once it kicks in. Hossein strongly cautions against that line of thought. "Democracy is only a process and not the result. Simply put, democracy means the participation of the people in decision-making. But what happens when the newly-empowered people are homophobic? I am not suggesting that democracy is bad, rather I am trying to caution us to be realistic about what marginalised groups, such as

traditional values which are incompatible with modernity and a centuries-old culture of submission to power and political apathy are among major barriers that stand in the way of those societies."

The greatest fear is that violently homophobic Islamist regimes like that in Iran will develop. Asked if that is a real threat Hossein says, "Definitely yes. The anxiety is shared by many progressive groups, from feminists and human rights activists to advocates for free speech. What is problematic here is not the sheer presence of Islamists in the government. Like other members of the society, they have a right to participate in political life and run for public office. The problem is that once they get elected, they have a tendency to impose their values on others and monopolise the political scene."

That doesn't have to be the case, though. Hossein points to Turkey's ruling Islamic AKP party, which came to office in 2003 and has not tried to silence opponents. In fact, despite a cold relationship between the Government and the LGBT community, Turkey is the only country in the region where LGBT groups are legally registered and protected as non-government organisations.

When IceQueer is asked if there's anything the international gay community can do to help he says, "If democratic political reforms happen in Egypt, international LGBT communities can help a lot by putting pressure on the Egyptian regime to apply these kind of reforms under the same umbrella of democratic reforms."

Hossein agrees to an extent – "The international solidarity movement remains a source of inspiration and support for many activists in the region. The LGBT movements in other countries can provide logistical and political support" – but urges those outside the region to tread carefully. "The international gay community should not try to parachute into the region and impose plans of actions that would ultimately jeopardise the fragile gay community in those countries. The international LGBT activists should take into consideration the cultural and political sensitivities and refrain from statements or actions that only provide more ammunition for the homophobic forces. I feel one of the most important things the international gay community can do is learn more about the complexity of the situation in the region and the challenges the LGBT people in those countries deal with on a daily basis."

All of it is designed to work towards one goal, which IceQueer is very excited about seeing realised. "We're hoping Egypt will become a real secular country one day, where people learn to accept their differences. Then they would start to accept people who are sexually different to them." ★

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in a number of societies in the region, where homosexuals are seen as a disgrace and a shame to the entire family," he says, adding this leads to a significant number of gays fleeing their home each year and seeking asylum in Western nations.

Asked if gays have been participating in the protests that have unfolded so far in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain and other nations Hossein gives an equivocal answer. "Yes and no," he says. "The LGBT people are part of their societies and, as such, have suffered from years of oppression and dictatorship. I have witnessed how many of our LGBT colleagues have been actively involved in the pro-democracy movement in Egypt and Tunisia. Yet the homophobia does not allow the gay people to participate in the movement as 'queer activists.' Therefore they remain invisible both inside and outside their country and no-one will notice the gay presence in these protests."

So far gay rights, or any kind of sexual rights, have not appeared on the agenda of the demonstrators and are not likely to. "This is partly due to the fact these movements are spontaneous and are mainly born out of

LGBT people, can accomplish in a democracy." As evidence he points to the fragile and rather faulty democracies that now exist in Afghanistan and Iraq as examples of places where democratic processes have not improved the situation for gays. "At the end of the day, it is the responsibility of the queer community and their allies to stand up for their rights and use the political opening to their advantage. Otherwise, no one is going to emancipate us."

Whatever happens, it's certain the region will never look the same again. "At the end of this political tsunami, the landscape of the region will change forever. Even those regimes that manage to survive will have to change their old way of doing business. This in itself is a welcome development, since the political leadership in the region is partly responsible for the social and economic problems that these countries are grappling with," Hossein says, before once again urging a very cautious type of optimism. "Some of the dark forces responsible for the underdevelopment of the region will stay strong. It would be up to the new governments to decide how they plan to address these challenges. Issues such as massive illiteracy, deep-seated gender discrimination,