

No to YES: Struggle for Equality in the Bahamas

***By Phil Janowski,
Research Associate at the Council on Hemispheric Affairs***

On June 8, the results were released of an important vote affecting issues of gender equality in the Bahamas. The 2016 Gender Equality Referendum (GER) has been the source of much controversy in the country, as the result of one faction known as YES Bahamas pushing for the passing of the legislations, and an opposition faction known as Save Our Bahamas (SOB) advocating against them. The bills contain measures that are commonplace in many developed countries across the world. However, on June 8, Bahamians rejected all four of them, ultimately supporting the unequal status quo. The bills were as follows:¹

Bill no. 1 would have given children born outside of the Bahamas, to Bahamian women, the right of citizenship.

Bill no. 2 would have given foreign husbands of Bahamian women the right of citizenship. It is worth noting that currently Bahamian men may pass on their citizenship to their foreign wives.

Bill no. 3 would have given children born to a Bahamian father outside the Bahamas the right of citizenship.

By far the most controversial, however, was Bill no. 4. Particularly vague, the bill “seeks to end discrimination based on sex.” Many reacted with fear at first hearing of the bill, interpreting the law as an allowance for gay marriage. However, Prime Minister Perry Christie vehemently denied this interpretation, stating that “I do not and have never advocated for an LGBT agenda. It is wrong and unfair to associate me with such a thought. (...)I would not be supporting bill four if it would change marriage in the Bahamas.”² Despite these words, the bill was crushed (along with the others in the Referendum) once voting began.

Prime Minister Christie has already condemned the defeat of the bills, which he believes would have greatly benefited the Bahamian people. It is not a secret that his government was funding the YES Bahamas campaign that aimed to have the GER pass. The YES Bahamas campaign blames the failure of the bills on confusion and a lack of

¹ Christie, Perry G. "PM Tables 4 Constitutional Amendment Bills." *Bahamas National*. N.p., n.d. Web. 09 June 2016.

² Jones, Royston, Jr. "PM 'not Pushing LGBT Agenda'" *The Nassau Guardian*. N.p., 6 June 2016. Web. 09 June 2016.

understanding among the voters— most likely in regards to the negative interpretation of Bill no. 4.³

No Concern for Gay Rights

Unfortunately, neither of the main political parties in the Bahamas is particularly interested in moving the gay rights agenda forward. The battle for the bills, and Bahamian politics in general, is a battle between two parties: the center-left Progressive Liberal Party (PLP) and the center-right Free National Movement. The Free National Movement's website, which is hopelessly outdated, offers little useful information on its positions.⁴ It was its mobilization against the GER with the SOB that makes its position clear.⁵ On the other end of the spectrum is the Progressive Liberal Party which, despite its name, has nothing positive to say in regards to gay rights. The PLP's website avoids mentioning homosexuals in any context, and Prime Minister Perry Christie was quick to shake his head when the opposition implied that he would cater to homosexuals.

The SOB team was and currently is convinced, however, that the entire vote was a conspiracy engineered by the United Nations to establish gay rights in the Bahamas, and that Christie was integral to this effort. On this side, SOB member Bishop Walter Hanchell stated that he believes the government should have been more up front with its goals, especially if it wanted to pass the first three bills of the referendum, which the SOB supposedly supported.

Looking back, LGBT rights do not have a profound legacy in the Bahamas. As suggested previously, same-sex marriage is not permitted. Furthermore, this has not been heavily challenged by members of the LGBT community, ever since the recent addition of amendments to the Bahamian constitution stating that marriage is between a man and a woman. Of particular note with these amendments is the ease with which they were passed, indicating the political power of the religious community in the Bahamas.⁶

Regardless of the true intentions behind both parties, the Bahamian people have voted against these progressive measures and, in the words of Hanchell, have “stood up for what is right; for righteousness in protecting our culture, our morals, and God has been faithful to us.” As long as the apparent majority of Bahamians hold this opinion, LGBT rights in the Bahamas will remain exceptionally stagnant.

Waves

In the weeks following the ruling, a few reactions have been surprising. Recognizing the latent homophobia behind the bills' failure to pass, some Bahamians have announced their derision for the hateful culture behind the homophobia. In an especially notable incidence on June 20, Foreign Affairs Minister Fred Mitchell accused the SOB campaign of “demonizing and dehumanizing” homosexuals in order to defeat the

³ Bethell, Keesha. "YES Bahamas Blames 'political Confusion' for No Vote." *The Nassau Guardian*. N.p., 8 June 2016. Web. 09 June 2016.

⁴ *Our FNM*. Free National Movement, 2015. Web. 9 June 2016.

⁵ Parker, K. Quincy. "Vote No Team: God Answered Prayers." *The Nassau Guardian*. N.p., 8 June 2016. Web. 9 June 2016.

⁶ Robards, Chester. "Government against Gay Marriages." *The Nassau Guardian*. N.p., 8 July 2011. Web. 13 June 2016.

GER. He states that the preachers behind the SOB campaign are not acting with love (as they claim to), but with hatred.⁷

Unfortunately, homophobia has long been present in the Bahamas, with little-to-no protections from discrimination present for homosexuals.⁸ Deeply rooted in the religion of the country, as well as the hearts and minds of its people, homophobia and associated fears are likely there to stay.

***By Phil Janowski,
Research Associate at the Council on Hemispheric Affairs***

⁷ Jones, Royston, Jr. "Mitchell Urges LGBT Tolerance." The Nassau Guardian. June 21, 2016. Accessed June 28, 2016.

⁸ Ammon, Richard. "Gay Life in The Bahamas." GlobalGayz RSS. September 20, 2012. Accessed June 28, 2016.