

African religious leaders rebuke Obama

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Religious leaders in Africa rebuked U.S. President Barack Obama's call to decriminalize homosexuality during his recent three-nation trip to the continent.

In a news conference in Senegal on July 27, the day after the U.S. Supreme Court struck down a federal ban on same-sex marriage, Obama said African nations must grant equal protection to all people regardless of their sexual orientation.

"My basic view is that regardless of race, regardless of religion, regardless of gender, regardless of sexual orientation, when it comes to how the law treats you, how the state treats you ... people should be treated equally," Obama said. "And that's a principle that I think applies universally."

But Obama's words rubbed religious and political leaders the wrong way. In Senegal, the West African nation where Islam is the predominant religion, homosexuality is a crime. Christianity and Islam are growing fast on the continent, and religious leaders in both faith communities responded with vehement denunciations.

Indeed, some clerics said Obama's statements on gays spoiled the welcome religious leaders and their followers could have accorded him.

"For religious leaders, in my point of view, this issue of homosexuality which he mentioned had really blocked the hospitality which the religious leaders desired to reserve for him," said the Rev. Pierre Adama Faye, a Senegalese Lutheran leader.

Homosexuality is illegal in 37 African countries, according to the Washington-based Council for Global Equality.

Sheikh Saliou Mbacke, a Senegalese Muslim leader who coordinates the Inter-Faith Action for Peace in Africa, said faith leaders have the duty to speak out, especially if outside forces want to impose their will.

"The subject of homosexuality must not be used as a tool to blackmail and coerce society to defy God's command, which is more important than any world power," he said.

Africans must be allowed to forge their own consensus on the subject, said Roman Catholic Cardinal John Njue of Nairobi, Kenya. "I think we need to act according to our own traditions and even our own faiths," he said.

"This is very important. We have to be proud of who we are." In Tanzania, Anglican Bishop Michael Hafidh of Dar es Salaam said religious leaders would have preferred for Obama to stick to economic issues during his June 27-July 2 trip.

Homosexuality, he said, "is not an important issue for us now. ... I think since we have a lot of resources, our discussions with the rest of the world should be more about investments and trade."

Fr. Victor Ndlovu, a Roman Catholic priest in Johannesburg, South Africa, where gay marriage is legal, said homosexuality has become a human rights issue in the West and many religious leaders are anxious about how that might affect their congregations.

"They are worried what will become of the past in which the practice has been a taboo," he said. "In reality, it exists in Africa, but the question is what we do when a man has said he wants to marry a man? It is a delicate balance."

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