

U.S. Presidential Elections and their Impact on LGBTIQ+ Communities and Activism across the African Continent

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Changes in American leadership can influence funding for LGBTI initiatives, transnational solidarity efforts, norms surrounding gender and sexuality, human rights discourses, and the dynamics of anti-gender movements.
– Nozizwe Ntesang¹

Introduction

The effects of presidential elections in the U.S. have historically been wide-reaching. This is even more so the case during times of globalized human rights contestations – specifically for already marginalized communities, such as the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer (LGBTIQ+) communities. The outcomes will be felt on different levels in the lived realities of LGBTIQ+ persons in many countries across the world. They will impact norms discourses, development cooperation, policies, and new legislation. This chapter sheds light on the impact of the elections on LGBTIQ+ communities across the African continent. To this end, the text brings together

1 Nozizwe Ntesang, Interview with Nozizwe Ntesang, written questionnaire, May 23, 2024.

the voices of (organized) civil society activists from Botswana, Cameroon, Kenya, Namibia, Nigeria, Uganda, and South Africa. The contributors Kevin Besong, Adrian Jjuuko, Āryā Jeipea Karijo, Belinda Qaqamba Makinana, Nozizwe Ntesang, Khanyisile Phillips, Omar van Reenen, Ayodele Sogunro, and Monica Tabengwa share their perceptions about the impact the 2024 U.S. presidential elections will have on norms and rights discourses, legislation, and development cooperation in their respective national and regional contexts.

In order to capture perspectives from activists situated within different national and regional African contexts, a questionnaire was sent out. I approached fifteen activists working towards advancing the rights of LGBTQ+ persons on national, regional, and international governance levels. The questions revolved around the general impact of U.S. American discourses about the human rights of LGBTQ+ persons, the impact of previous U.S. presidential elections as well as the expected impact of the upcoming election on various African contexts. Out of the nine responses, I conducted two interviews online,² and the other persons replied in writing.

This chapter is clustered around the topics raised by the experts including as much of the content of the interviews as space allows. The interviewed experts have backgrounds in the social sciences, legal studies, development cooperation, and social work. They bring various situated perspectives to this chapter. They speak from the perspective of activists and/or members of LGBTQ+ communities and are engaged in organized civil society networks or organizations. They are experts on their lived realities and have many years of work experience in activism, advocacy, and litigation. They are best placed to speak to the topic of this chapter. Thus I am including as much content from the written statements and the interviews as possible, acting only to weave them together and contextualize them.

The denomination of sexual orientation and gender identity under the umbrella acronym LGBTQ+ is a largely Western conceptualization, one that is heavily influenced by debates in the U.S.A. The term and acronym render invisible non-Western descriptions and designations. The continuation and reproduction of (post)colonial structures need to be reflected on, as does the use of the 'common' abbreviation, which makes other terms, identifications, bodies, and lived realities invisible. This is in itself highly problematic and a continuation of hierarchical power dynamics. Furthermore, it is important to note that

2 One interview was with Monica Tabengwa, the other was with Belinda Qaqamba Makinana and Khanyisile Phillips.

the acronym is an oversimplification of the different identities, lived realities and the intersections of identities of the people it tries to describe. At the same time, the umbrella acronym also serves as a unifier in transnational struggles and is used not only by the activists contributing to this piece but the wider international communities.

My own situatedness is that of a *white*, lesbian, cis-woman, a trained political scientist, and a postdoctoral researcher at a German University. I conduct research in eastern and southern African national and regional contexts on norms and rights discourses surrounding LGBTQIA+ persons and communities, the colonial legacies of anti-LGBTQIA+ laws and norms, such as those of ‘UnAfricanness’ as well as violence unfolding from colonialism (until) today. I have collaborated with most of the contributors to this chapter previously, and we will continue to work together in various projects.

The insights from the nine contributors are reflected on and discussed in three sections. First, the chapter describes the ways in which discourses in the U.S. impact on LGBTQIA+ related discussions in the national and regional contexts of the activists who have contributed their perspectives. Second, the chapter focuses on the impact that previous administrations in the U.S. have had with regard to the rights and norms discourses concerning LGBTQIA+ people and communities. Third, the text reflects on the activists’ expectations regarding the upcoming U.S. presidential elections in November 2024, and details how they believe the election outcomes will make themselves felt national and regional discourses about LGBTQIA+ rights.

The Impact of U.S. American Discourses on the Human Rights of LGBTQIA+ persons and Norm Contestations

When the U.S. sneezes, the world catches a cold.³

The following insights shed light on just how deeply debates in the U.S.A. are felt in the African countries included in this analysis when it comes to the human rights of LGBTQIA+ populations. When Khanyisile Phillips states that “when the U.S. sneezes, the world catches a cold,” she is referring to is

3 Khanyisile Phillips, Interview with Khanyisile Phillips, transcribed audio recording, May 24, 2024.

the right-wing movements that have gained ground during the past decade and the *de jure* and *de facto* developments concerning the rights of LGBTQIA+ persons that have accompanied these movements. These changes can be seen in the U.S., but they are also “spilling over to various parts of Africa,” as Belinda Qaqamba Makinana adds in the interview I conducted with the two activists from South Africa. This notion was shared by many of the contributors to this text. In what follows, this insight is further unpacked with regard to two issues: one, the impact that norms and rights discourses have, specifically, the power of U.S. American anti-LGBTQIA+ movements; and North-South relations, particularly with a view to donor dependency but also in relation to transnational solidarity.

Belinda Qaqamba Makinana continues:

Narratives on “let’s protect the child” and these anxieties specifically around gender that are created, and this fear about how gender is made to be something to fear – as something that is there to influence children, something that exists to influence freedom and really trouble the notion of family – which is then turned into something that needs to be protected. Specifically, with the elections in America, we see, and I mean this particularly for the Trump era, this moving towards right-wing politics and restrictions of human rights. So, we see this move to the right, which we are also now starting to see playing out in Africa, which threatens human rights and LGBTQIA+ rights further.⁴

Namibian activist Omar van Reenen underscores this notion:

Trump’s rollback of protections for trans persons has also emboldened local anti-rights groups to create a hostile environment and policymakers to strengthen their regressive approach to laws. We saw this with the passage of anti-LGBTQ bills which mirror that of state legislatures long after Trump’s presidency.⁵

Nozizwe Ntesang stresses this when she says:

4 Belinda Qaqamba Makinana, Interview with Belinda Makinana, transcribed audio recording, May 24, 2024.

5 Omar van Reenen, Interview with Omar van Reenen, written questionnaire, May 25, 2024.

[A]s a queer researcher from Botswana with extensive advocacy experience across East and Southern Africa, I have witnessed the significant impact of American discourses on lesbian, bisexual, and queer (LBQ) organizing and communities in our region. The globalized nature of the world and the disproportionate power wielded by nations like the U.S.A. inevitably shapes the landscape of LGBTQI rights and activism in Africa. The ripple effects of American discourses on LBQ communities are profound, touching upon various aspects of activism and social change.⁶

Ntesang unpacks this further with a view to southern African countries, such as Botswana, Namibia, and South Africa, when she states that they

have made, and continue to make, strides towards decriminalization and legal recognition of LGBTQI rights. However, the anti-LGBTQI sentiments sweeping through East Africa, fueled by religious fundamentalists often supported by American actors, pose significant challenges. The existence of regressive legislation and rhetoric threatens to undermine the progress made in decriminalizing same-sex relationships, perpetuating discrimination and violence against LBQ individuals.⁷

As pointed out, not only the discourses in the U.S.A. are spilling over to African countries, but they are taking shape in policies and legislations. This has become especially evident in Ghana, Kenya, and Uganda in the past year.⁸

The discourse in Kenya around queer rights is very much impacted by the U.S., according to Āryā Jeipea Karijo. She explains this with regard to the recently proposed Family Protection Bill by Parliamentarian Peter Kaluma:⁹

6 Ntesang, Interview with Nozizwe Ntesang.

7 Ibid.

8 CIVICUS, "Commonwealth Africa: LGBTQI+ Rights under Attack. Anti-Rights Reaction in Ghana, Kenya and Uganda Seeks to Erase LGBTQI+ People," CIVICUS LENS, April 19, 2023, <https://lens.civicus.org/commonwealth-africa-lgbtqi-rights-under-attack/>; Ottilia Anna Maunganidze and Chelsea Cohen, "Anti-Gay Laws: Africa's Human Rights Regression," ISS Today, September 27, 2023, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/anti-gay-laws-africas-human-rights-regression>.

9 Ayenat Mersie and Mukelwa Hlatshwayo, "Insight: Kenya Could Follow Uganda as East African Nations Wage War on LGBT Rights," Reuters, June 27, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/kenya-could-follow-uganda-east-african-nations-wage-war-lgbt-rights-2023-06-22/>.

The parts in this bill that target transgender people is a direct copy from the anti-transgender bills that are being proposed or passed in the U.S. (520 house bills and counting in 2024). It is clear that the originators of this bill are not local actors. Concerns addressed in the anti-transgender section of the bill are not contextual to Kenya. For example, “the bathroom issue.” Kenya as a country is working on WASH projects (Water, Sanitation and Hygiene) which includes providing toilets to schools, clean water to communities. Without discounting the needs of transgender people in accessing bathrooms, this has never been a local point of activism. The second non-contextual issue that has been an obsession in the U.S. is the transitioning of minors. Again, without discounting the needs of young below minority age queer folk, in Kenya the issue has been access to health-care for all. Even adult transgender people are not getting transitioning support let alone young people.¹⁰

Karijo points to the diffusion of certain rights and norms discourses in a similar way to how Makinana frames the “spill over” in the above. The diffusion is targeted, and as Karijo explains, it is further traceable to the U.S.:

A side by side reading of U.S. anti-transgender legislation with sections of the laws that have been passed in Ghana, Uganda and are proposed for Kenya shows the authors are the same, they are global and they are definitely not from the continent. Key people leading the charge for these bills in Ghana, Kenya and Uganda have been in meetings with Sharon Slater of Family Watch International and on one occasion even had an audience with President Yoweri Museveni of Uganda.¹¹

Omar van Reenen sees a similar development in Namibia:

I realized anti-rights groups in the U.S. share resources, strategies and rhetoric internationally, the transnational exchange of anti-rights ideologies (pro-life and anti-LGBTQI+) imported from American Evangelical groups and NGO's like Family Watch international are alive and well.¹²

10 Āryā Jeipea Karijo, Interview with Āryā Jeipea Karijo, written questionnaire, May 10, 2024.

11 Ibid.

12 van Reenen, Interview with Omar van Reenen.

Khanyisile Phillips explains the impact of these movements for South Africa and the continent:

Family Watch International is one of the biggest anti-gender movement organizations in the world and they are impacting South African politics. They even funded the African Christian Democratic Party, which held a protest a few years ago where they provided placards all over the country, stating: “Teach our kids maths, not masturbation.” Speaking to comprehensive sexuality education that was introduced in the South African curriculum and pushing back regarding the guidelines for the inclusion of diverse sexual orientations, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics. As much as there are also positive influences, depending on who is in power in the U.S., you also get these very negative regressions that we experience worldwide. Those that they experience in the U.S. and then we experience them in Africa. It is even more difficult for our siblings in other parts of Africa compared to us here in South Africa.

Yes, South Africa, of course, has legal protections for LGBTQIA+ persons based on our constitution. And we know that there are issues with regards to the enactment of the constitution, for example, when people need that protection and reach out for essential services, lifesaving services. We know these are the limitations in the South African context. But I think it is important to note that there are other African countries where the positionality of the U.S. can be life threatening. And that must not be overlooked. Because if we are looking at and talking about discourses, we are speaking about how people are just talking about it. But it is not just that; people act on these discourses. People react to them and people lose their families and their lives. It is a dangerous thing that is happening when we see the U.S. moving in a certain direction and other countries literally following suit.¹³

Disguising anti-homosexuality, anti-transgender, and anti-LGBTIQ+ rhetoric under the framework of so-called family values is a move that scholars and journalists have started to analyze critically. Many of the responses from the

13 Phillips, Interview with Khanyisile Phillips.

contributors here point to a misuse and misappropriation of the concept of family values, in general, but in particular with regard to African contexts.¹⁴

North-South Collaborations and Donor Cooperation

Widespread talk about so-called family values impacts not only norms and rights in African contexts, but the influence of this discourse is also felt in relation to donor funded programs. Ntesang points to the highly complex issues that activists in African and other Global Southern contexts have to navigate:

Power dynamics in donor relations and donor funding, while crucial for LBQ activism in Africa, often perpetuates neocolonial power dynamics. African activists must navigate the complexities of donor relations, balancing the need for financial support with the imperative to maintain autonomy and integrity. The influence of American donors, driven by their own agendas and biases, can shape the priorities and strategies of African LBQ movements.¹⁵

Historical and political entanglements are pervasive and wide-reaching. They can be felt up until today when power dynamics are reproduced through donor-recipient collaborations.

Human rights activist and lawyer Ayodele Sogunro explains the multi-layered and complex relationships between the providers and receivers of development cooperation funding:

U.S. LGBTIQ+ discourse tends to set the pace for both activism and anti-rights issues in the Nigerian and wider African contexts. On the one hand, activists and organizations in Nigeria have to work with their global partners and donors. These relationships are important for solidifying transnational solidarity, ensuring a flow of resources, a meaningful exchange of ideas. However, they also have the tendency to set priorities that may be a-contextual without necessarily meaning to do this. On the other hand,

14 van Reenen, Interview with Omar van Reenen; Makinana, Interview with Belinda Makinana; Monica Tabengwa, Interview with Monica Tabengwa, transcribed audio recording, May 28, 2024.

15 Ntesang, Interview with Nozizwe Ntesang.

anti-rights actors from the U.S. tend to see African contexts, including Nigeria, as fertile ground for spreading disinformation and sowing moral panics.¹⁶

A major shift in funding during the Trump administration was significantly felt in different contexts on the African continent and has had a lasting impact. Monica Tabengwa, a human rights advocate, explains this change:

There is a lot of money coming out of the U.S. and that money might be attached to certain politics. Take for instance the issue around *Roe vs. Wade*, which concerns a very serious reproductive health issue: abortion rights. When Trump came into power, the gag rule happened. That meant a lot of money that was meant to be supporting family planning, abortion rights, safer abortion was cut off. And that was in direct connection to who was sitting in the White House.¹⁷

Omar van Reenen takes this one step further when stating:

I believe when the U.S. was under the Trump administration many minority groups then had to turn their resources inwards as the country was under crisis, impacting our movement building efforts. We learn many innovative strategies from our U.S. partners, but their capacity to share those became less available when discourses shifted, and when gag-orders were put into place limiting our ability to interact and partner. ... Funding is always reliable under progressive administrations who increase their support for advocacy, education and awareness. Conservative ones limit it and make it more challenging to sustain and grow our efforts.

This has led to a change in fundraising, as it

helped us realize that we need to start relying on domestic and regional sources of support. Average Namibians have started to support our queer movement and showing up for us. U.S. funding has also always been very restrictive towards supporting core funding of LGBTQI+ NGO's and in many ways dictate what sort of projects can and cannot be funded, leaving our

16 Ayodele Sogunro, Interview with Ayodele Sogunro, written questionnaire, May 25, 2024.

17 Tabengwa, Interview with Monica Tabengwa.

local contexts and needs. Making us realize that we need to source financial support on our own terms that pays attention to our local needs.¹⁸

Adding another layer of complexity to the issue of external interference, human rights advocate Kevin Besong explains the Cameroonian context:

Presently, in Cameroon, there is an increasing wave of anti-LGBT and anti-gender movements, which are being sponsored for political reasons to gain favor in the eyes of the public,¹⁹ like telling Cameroonians that the U.S.A. and France are trying to impose sin. Lesbians have been thrown out of their homes by owners because of their supposed or perceived sin. Attacks on transgender women are also frequent.²⁰ Consequently, said movements increase when North American or European governments call for African governments to respect the fundamental rights of LGBT+ persons.²¹

In many regards South Africa is an exception on the continent and worldwide, as was already alluded to by Khanyisile Phillips in the above. The *de jure* rights of LGBTIQ+ persons are safeguarded widely through the constitution, while the *de facto* violence LGBTIQ+ persons experience is high. Deconstructing the umbrella term “LGBTIQ+” shows that violence against members of the community manifests itself differently along the lines of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and gender identity and expression, and other aspects as well as intersectionally – as pointed out in the introduction. As Makinana explains:

I think that the funding pool has always been competitive and quite small especially for South Africa, because there is this particular notion that South Africa does not have a huge need because there is a constitution that recognizes LGBTQIA+ persons, which is erroneous in its own right, because it forgets that there can be laws. But they need to be protected and they need to be advanced. And there is also the social work that needs to be done domestically for those particular rights to be enacted.²²

18 van Reenen, Interview with Omar van Reenen.

19 Rita Schäfer and Eva Range, “The Political Use of Homophobia Human Rights and Persecution of LGBTI Activists in Africa,” chap. 2.4 “Cameroon” (Bonn: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, March 2014), <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/10610.pdf>.

20 Referenced here is the case of Franky and Jonas, two Cameroonian transgender women, defended in court by Alice Nkom in 2013 and 2014.

21 Kevin D. Besong, Interview with Kevin D. Besong, written questionnaire, May 27, 2024.

22 Makinana, Interview with Belinda Makinana.

The Impact of Previous U.S. American Administrations on the Rights of LGBTQ+ Persons and Communities in African Countries

Can we afford another four years of Trump? No. We cannot.²³

The following statements refer to previous U.S. American presidents and, in particular, to the transition from Barack Obama to Donald Trump; they provide a multifaceted picture. As mentioned above, the Global Gag Rule implemented by the Trump administration had wide reaching implications for the work of activists and those working with LGBTQ+ communities. This rule prevents organizations that receive U.S. global health assistance from providing information and services on legal abortion or advocating for access to abortion services in their country. This even applies to programs run with their own money. When Monica Tabengwa asks: “Can we afford another four years of Trump?” and then answers: “No. We cannot,” she basically summarizes the responses from all of the contributors to this text. Going beyond the Trump presidency, even the Obama administration’s policies led to mixed consequences for activists and communities on the African continent, although the administration also provided funding and support for U.S. American and global LGBTQ+ communities.

Kevin Besong sheds light on this from the perspective of Cameroon:

In my community, I vividly remember the days of Obama’s presidential campaign and election as the first African American president with Kenyan heritage, who also championed LGBT+ rights. Then, it was seen as a wave or strategy to convince African leaders to buy into an idea of promoting and adopting this “way of life.” As a result, in Cameroon in particular and Africa in general, the championing of LGBT+ rights increased homophobia and attacks upon gays and lesbians. Also, there were sarcastic statements being made (e.g. gay people wearing diapers, homosexuality being unAfrican, gay people being failures) as well as degrading words spoken to gay people. This tense atmosphere contributed to the LGBTQ+ struggle in Cameroon, which became even more difficult.²⁴

Āryā Jeipea Karijo, from Kenya, underlines this ambivalence:

23 Tabengwa, Interview with Monica Tabengwa.

24 Besong, Interview with Kevin D. Besong.

During President Obama's tenure, Africa experienced the largest push to uphold queer rights. The fact that he was a Black President with African/Kenyan roots and he was advocating for queer rights was very important. On the downside it also cemented the thought in people's minds that "LGBTIQ was an American and Western agenda" and failed to humanize LGBTQ+ people as people, even African people.²⁵

The complexity of the involvement of the U.S. in the Ugandan LGBTQ+ context is mapped out by Adrian Jjuuko, a human rights lawyer, scholar, and activist:

The U.S.A. is a major player in Uganda as regards LGBTI rights – for both the anti-gay and the pro-gay movements. Republicans tend to be anti-gay while democrats tend to be pro-gay – and then there is Donald Trump, who even goes beyond mainstream republican ideas. So, under Obama or Biden there is a lot of (political) support coming from the U.S. government for the LGBTI rights movement – while during the Bush and Trump eras there was almost no political support. This also increases conversations about LGBTI rights and protections, and activists are given more prominent visibility and feel more protected. There is also more international solidarity during these periods. At the same time, we also see anti-LGBTI legislation flaring during the presidencies of democrats – which sounds ironic – but which can be explained by the fact that it works as some sort of push back against the liberal agendas of the reigning presidents. For example, the Ugandan Anti-Homosexuality Act was first debated when Obama was president. There was no such law during Trump's presidency, yet, it came back in 2023 during Biden's term. This does not imply that having anti-gay presidents in the U.S. is good for LGBTI rights in Uganda, the opposite is rather the case: pro-LGBTI presidents send a clear message to the Ugandan politicians which in turn makes them hide behind anti-gay laws. We also see a rise in anti-gay support from the U.S. during times when democrats are in power. It seems to reflect that when they lose on their home turf, homophobes focus on Africa. This also explains the anti-gay laws.²⁶

According to Nozizwe Ntesang:

[P]ast American presidential elections have had significant implications for LBQTI rights and activism in Botswana. The relationship between the two

25 Karijo, Interview with Āryā Jjepea Karijo.

26 Adrian Jjuuko, Interview with Adrian Jjuuko, written questionnaire, June 18, 2024.

countries, primarily centered around HIV funding, intersects with broader human rights discourse and advocacy efforts. Changes in American leadership can result in shifts in foreign policy priorities, funding allocations, and international pressure on Botswana to address human rights concerns, including those related to LBQTI rights. As a result, the political dynamics between Botswana and the U.S.A. play a crucial role in shaping the landscape of LBQTI activism and rights advocacy in Botswana.²⁷

She unpacks this statement further, thereby providing valuable insights into the dynamics that have unfolded in the past and are indicative of the results of the upcoming presidential elections in the U.S.A. and their impact on Botswana and, possibly, also other African countries.

Botswana and the U.S.A. have historically maintained a significant relationship, primarily centered around HIV funding. The U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) has been a crucial source of funding for Botswana's HIV/AIDS response, providing financial support for prevention, treatment, and care programs. ... The allocation of funding through programs like PEPFAR can also be influenced by changes in American leadership. While PEPFAR funding is primarily targeted at HIV/AIDS programs, shifts in priorities or budget allocations may indirectly impact other health and human rights initiatives, including those related to LBQTI rights and activism.

She explains the influence of the U.S.A. within the international system further:

The U.S.A.'s position on LBQTI rights can also exert international pressure on Botswana and other partner countries to address human rights concerns. Diplomatic engagement, conditionality of aid, and public statements from American officials can all contribute to shaping the human rights landscape in Botswana and influencing government policies and actions regarding LBQTI rights.²⁸

In a similar vein, Belinda Qaqamba Makinana maps out how the U.S.A.'s role in international organizations, like the United Nations (UN) under former president Trump, influences the foreign policy of South Africa:

27 Ntesang, Interview with Nozizwe Ntesang.

28 Ibid.

In particular with the Trump administration, we saw how the U.S. withdrew from the UN Human Rights Council, which the U.S.A. has been part of for many, many years, really bringing in that point I made around modelling democracy, upholding human rights. And when the U.S. withdrew from the Human Rights Council in 2018 it really left countries like South Africa wanting to step in, because here is this country that really modelled human rights and protected human rights, saying, in fact: this UN Human Rights Council does not serve its purpose anymore. And this also then affects funding.

If you look right now in particular at the U.S., they fund a lot of HIV work and not specifically work on the advancement of and protection of human rights. And not that HIV work is not important; it is! But most of the funds, specifically coming from the U.S., are going to HIV work and not much is going towards Trans or LGBT work in general. We also clearly see a decrease on funding specifically tailored for black and brown persons. That is another dynamic we witness. Really, the type of funding they give or they are disseminating to the world, the type of aid they are disseminating, is very much reflective of their current state and where they are moving. And how they withdraw in particular from UNESCO and other UN mechanisms. That withdrawal shows in particular what is happening in South Africa. South Africa currently released a White Paper to withdraw from the Refugee Convention among others.²⁹

So, they are following suit of a precedent that was set by the U.S., further impacting human rights. Because these conventions and these commitments and the signature to these conventions become advocacy tools to us as human rights workers. They become human rights mechanisms with which we hold our government to account. Because if you have signed to protect children, you must also protect LGBTQIA+ children. So, we use these conventions and treaties strategically in our advocacy work. When the U.S. moves away and they withdraw from UNESCO, from the UN Human Rights Council, we also see our countries following suit. Because these conventions become less binding and they become voluntary. And that is a danger for human rights.³⁰

29 South African Government, "Minister Aaron Motsoaledi: Release of Final White Paper on Citizenship, Immigration and Refugee Protection," April 17, 2024, <https://www.gov.za/news/media-statements/minister-aaron-motsoaledi-release-final-white-paper-citizenship-immigration>.

30 Makinana, Interview with Belinda Makinana.

The Expected Impact of the 2024 U.S. Presidential Elections on the Rights of LGBTQ+ People and Communities in African Countries

Africans should not be expected to push back against the American export of homophobia.³¹

The responses to the question about the expected impact of the 2024 U.S. presidential elections alternated between a relative sense of comfort and a cautious hopefulness in the event of a continuation of the Biden administration.³² Contributors expected a worsening of funding and other types of support for the work on LGBTQ+ related topics in the event that Trump wins, and they reported on a deep lack of trust in the U.S.A. as an entity that upholds the human rights of marginalized groups of persons.

The latter sentiments are embedded in the more recent developments on the global level. Āryā Jeipea Karijo, for example, points out:

I expect that outsider groups' human rights will be seen as non-rights similar to the U.S. demonstration of Palestinian rights; African governments will pick groups they deem unworthy of human rights.³³

She further contextualizes this with the politically motivated changes that affect the rights of women (cis and trans), non-binary persons, and LGBTQ+ persons.

Increasingly *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* will be used in Supreme Court decisions. The discourse around human rights has fundamentally changed in the world after October 7th. The world will witness more dehumanization of groups that are considered less worthy of human rights. In Africa, LGBTQ+ people will be on top of the list as targets for dehumanization and violation of rights.³⁴

31 van Reenen, Interview with Omar van Reenen.

32 The interviews were conducted before Biden ended his bid for re-election. In order to retain the original words and thoughts of the contributors to this chapter, we have decided to retain references to President Biden.

33 Karijo, Interview with Āryā Jeipea Karijo.

34 Ibid.

Omar van Reenen makes this point even more explicit:

To be honest the outcome of the 2024 election is inconsequential. The current unfolding of the genocide in Gaza and the U.S. support for Israel has led us in the global south to view the U.S. as losing its moral arc on upholding international human rights standards. While a victory for a progressive Biden administration will provide the consistency, we need to reinforce and expand support for LGBTQIA+ rights globally, which may further anti-discriminatory policies in Namibia/global south, we are losing our faith in the U.S. as a nation that furthers equality.

A win for a conservative Trump presidency actually will not change much besides bringing back gag orders and a limitation in funding. We have seen the true colors of the U.S. That both progressive and conservative administrations reinforce human rights abuses, even if it does not pertain to LGBTQIA+ rights. Today its Palestinians who suffer for U.S. political interests, tomorrow it could be indigenous communities in climate affected countries to continue profits for multinational corporate interests. All minority and unliberated communities can become victims of U.S. political interests.³⁵

This deep loss in trust in the U.S. as a defender of human rights has been met with various strategies by activists. Nozizwe Ntesang outlines this trend:

As African activists increasingly embrace decolonial approaches in their activism, it becomes imperative to critically examine the relationship between the U.S.A. (and the West) and Africa. The prevailing power dynamics must be dismantled to pave the way for a reimagined LGBTI activism rooted in joy and anti-colonialism.³⁶

This is particularly the case with regard to the increasing export of anti-LGBTIQ+ norms and legislation initiatives from the U.S.A. to African countries, as Omar van Reenen states. Even though

progressive administrations will surely help us oppose and restrict and push back against these groups domestically. But what needs to happen is to ensure U.S. foreign policy weakens anti-rights groups networks and reduces their impact in Namibia. It is counterintuitive to fund Namibia LGBTQIA+

35 van Reenen, Interview with Omar van Reenen.

36 Ntesang, Interview with Nozizwe Ntesang.

groups to push back against the import of American religious extremism if the standard is not held on U.S. soil. These groups need to be held accountable within the U.S., no tax incentive for groups who influence policy like in Uganda, because in the end it will be American taxpayer funds that are then sent to LGBTQI+ groups to do the work for them. Africans should not be expected to push back against American export of homophobia.³⁷

Expectations of a Possible Biden Administration

The prospect of the continuation of a democratically led government under President Biden for another four years elicited a sense of cautious hopefulness in the activists who contributed to this chapter. Kevin Besong points to the importance of the appointment of Christopher Lamora, a gay man, as Ambassador of the U.S.A. to Cameroon.³⁸

The Biden presidency has already proved its worth in the fight for LGBT+ rights in Cameroon by sending us an openly gay diplomat. This is a very strong message from the Biden Administration, communicating that Cameroon's LGBT+ community is not alone and the U.S. is watching! Also, showing that being gay is okay and gay people are leaders.³⁹

Concrete measures that are expected include that

the U.S. calls on the Cameroon government's attention to fight anti-gender groups. I expect a Biden Administration to adopt measures for the protection LGBT+ movement at their place of work, more and outstanding security measures should be included in the U.S. agenda and action plan for the future. For instance, lobbying for laws to be enacted for the protection of LGBT+ human rights defenders especially female human rights defenders. Transgender rights should be made more visible and measures taken to protect them.⁴⁰

37 van Reenen, Interview with Omar van Reenen.

38 Keegan Williams, "New Ambassador of Cameroon, Where Homosexuality Is Illegal, Is Gay," Out Front Magazine, January 4, 2022, <https://www.outfrontmagazine.com/new-ambassador-cameroon-is-gay/>.

39 Besong, Interview with Kevin D. Besong.

40 Ibid.

In expectation that the U.S. will continue to support and enable work that advances the human rights of LGBTQ+ persons and communities, Omar van Reenen points out that

the Biden administration [has] helped us heal from the scarcity of funds we experienced from the Trump administration, as funds were specifically earmarked for LGBTQ+ advocacy efforts, bolstering support for advocacy, education and community support initiatives. In retrospect, conservative administrations such as Trump's went further than just limiting funds, but restricting funds for many causes, impacting our health and human rights initiatives.

They also point out that

even under a progressive Biden administration we have seen the passage of stricter anti-LGBTQ+ bills in Namibia, while the Biden administration has said little to nothing on this issue. So, will anything change if the Biden administration has stayed silent and continued its investment in developmental projects in Namibia without holding our government accountable? ⁴¹

Expectations of a Possible Trump Administration

"If Trump gets elected that would spell disaster for LGBT organizing in Uganda"⁴² is the first response by Adrian Jjuuko to the question. As the statements below illustrate, this is true beyond the Ugandan context. Ayodele Sogunro sheds light on what another four years of Trump in the White House might mean for the Nigerian context:

[A] Trump win will cement the *Dobbs v. Jackson [Women's Health Organization]* decision, thus lending legitimacy to anti-rights movements, who are now using the courts as their forum. Consequently, courts in Nigeria may follow the lead of the Ugandan Constitutional Court in citing it as an exemplary jurisprudence to roll back rights and refuse to acknowledge LGBTQ+ rights. Likewise, executive policy is likely to take a cue from the anti-

41 van Reenen, Interview with Omar van Reenen.

42 Jjuuko, Interview with Adrian Jjuuko.

rights rhetoric of the far right republicans and use this as an excuse to violate LGBTQIA+ rights in Nigeria. Nevertheless, transnational solidarity and private donor funding is unlikely to be affected and may even increase with the corresponding increase in anti-rights sentiment.⁴³

Concerning the eastern African context, Āryā Jeipea Karijo points out that

Donald Trump's tenure has all rights spaces including SRHR [sexual and reproductive health and rights], sex worker rights, abortion and bodily autonomy rights, LGBTQIA+ rights and even the fight against stigma around HIV/Aids set back almost a decade. During Trump's tenure Kenya's Ministry of Health withdrew abortion guidelines extrajudicially and it took activism litigation to have them restored. The fact that the Uganda Supreme Court relied on *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* (a U.S. Supreme Court decision that overturned *Roe v. Wade*) to uphold the anti-homosexuality act 2023.⁴⁴

She anticipates that a similarly devastating impact for norms and rights discourses concerning LGBTQIA+ persons and communities will be caused by an additional four years of a Trump administration. Speaking about Cameroon, Kevin Besong outlines the direct impact that the outcome of the U.S. elections will have:

If the Trump administration wins, the struggle of LGBT+ persons in Cameroon will heighten. Arguably, Cameroon authorities will make the struggle for LGBT+ rights extremely difficult to advance; also, the hounding and harassment will become more severe. Ultimately, attacks on LGBT+ people in Cameroon will continue.⁴⁵

Tabengwa reflects on lessons learnt from the first Trump term and the lasting impact of his presidency:

[I]n the past when someone asked me “what do you think is going to happen in Africa because of the U.S. elections?” I would say: I don't think anything is going to happen. But then we saw things happen. We saw what I mentioned about sexual and reproductive health and rights. For instance, there

43 Sogunro, Interview with Ayodele Sogunro.

44 Karijo, Interview with Āryā Jeipea Karijo.

45 Besong, Interview with Kevin D. Besong.

is money coming out of the U.S. government to support CSOs [civil society organizations] in African countries and at the time they could not work on and their money could not be used on any of those SRHR issues.

And that was and is an important thing in a lot of African countries; anywhere really. Providing family planning is very important. So, can we afford to have another four years of Trump? No, we cannot. Because we have already seen what that did in reversing such rights. I never believed that *Roe v. Wade* would be overturned. But it happened. And thus, anything we thought we could trust, we cannot trust. Even with the Democrats winning the last election, the damage was done; because there are now institutional changes and institutions in place that were set up. And dismantling those institutions takes time. ...

I believe that there is more at stake this time, especially because of what has happened. Especially because of what was set up during the Trump era. So, if the U.S.A. goes back to a Republican-led government, there is nothing that is going to stop these right-wing organizations and they will be even more empowered. They can go out and spread more hate. So, I think there is even more at stake this time than the last time.⁴⁶

Drawing on his experiences of the previous Trump administration, Adrian Jjuuko foresees the following scenario:

If Trump gets elected that would spell disaster for LGBT organizing in Uganda. He has been there before – so we know that. Such elections affect who is Ambassador and who is the political/human rights officer in Uganda and these have direct impact on engagements with activists and communities. Moving from a Biden presidency to a Trump Presidency is not something that we look forward to, especially at a time when Ugandan activists are grappling with the Anti-Homosexuality Act.⁴⁷

46 Tabengwa, Interview with Monica Tabengwa.

47 Jjuuko, Interview with Adrian Jjuuko.

Conclusion

In addition to the U.S., elections will be held in sixty-three countries in 2024, and will involve 49% of the world's population casting a vote.⁴⁸ In nineteen African countries, presidential and/or general elections are being carried out: in Algeria, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Chad, Comoros, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Mauritania, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Rwanda, Senegal, Somaliland, South Africa, South Sudan, and Tunisia.⁴⁹ Regarding the entanglement of the upcoming presidential elections in Botswana and the U.S.A., Nozizwe Ntesang notes the following:

[T]hey coincide with a pivotal moment for LGBTQI+ activism at both national and regional levels. In Botswana, where LGBTQI+ rights remain a contentious issue, the political landscape surrounding the elections and constitutional review will shape the future of advocacy efforts and legislative reforms. Regional dynamics, influenced by the outcome of the U.S. elections and regional cooperation among activists, will further shape the trajectory of LGBTQI+ activism in Southern Africa. As activists continue to push for equality and inclusion, the elections present both challenges and opportunities for advancing the rights and dignity of LGBTQI+ persons in Botswana and beyond.⁵⁰

The multilayered effects of the elections in the U.S.A. and resultant challenges and opportunities are reflected on in the insights by the nine experts who articulate themselves in this chapter. For the majority of them, developments during the past few years have shown that the LGBTQI+ communities in the African contexts that are discussed here cannot and should not continue to count on the U.S. government for support of their causes – regardless of whoever is sitting in the White House.

Another four years of a Trump led administration will have dire and wide reaching consequences for funding and, more widely, for the work of activists fighting for the rights of LGBTQI+ persons in African contexts. Gag rule(s), the

48 Koh Ewe, "The Ultimate Election Year: All the Elections around the World in 2024," TIME, December 28, 2023, <https://time.com/6550920/world-elections-2024/>.

49 Joseph Siegle and Candace Cook, "Africa's 2024 Elections: Challenges and Opportunities to Regain Democratic Momentum," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, January 17, 2024, updated June 12, 2024, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/2024-elections/>.

50 Ntesang, Interview with Nozizwe Ntesang.

weakening of democratic institutions, and cuts/shifts in budget in the U.S. directly and indirectly effect the work and livelihoods of communities and activists across the African continent. Conditions are expected to get worse under a second Trump administration and will continue to make activism for the rights of LGBTQIA+ persons significantly more challenging.

Yet if the Democratic candidate is elected, there is a glimmer of hope. For certain countries, the respective activists assume that the impact of the elections will be very direct. Kevin Besong, for example, goes so far as to say that the “2024 elections will either make or mar advocacy and lobbying in Cameroon.”⁵¹ For others, as discussed above, the influence of the elections will be more indirect and depend on the national context.

Certain aspects of the influence of these elections are deeply entangled. This includes how anti-gender and anti-LGBTQIA+ movements in the U.S.A. spill over and diffuse around the globe. A deep loss of trust in the U.S. as an upholder of human rights, in general, but of the rights of marginalized groups of persons, in particular, results out of this spill over and has made itself felt in many contexts. This extends to the U.S. based and U.S. funded anti-LGBTQIA+ movements that currently manifest themselves in norm discourses, legislation initiatives, policies, and development cooperation in African national and regional contexts. The spill over is also felt on a global scale in growing fractions in the aftermath of the 7th of October 2023, as some of the contributors point out.

In order to counter these developments, some strategies are outlined for the future. They include the importance of creating stronger transnational alliances across the continent and, increasingly and where possible, looking to national and regional sources for funding and support rather than international ones. Furthermore, it is important to continue to point out and deconstruct post- and neo-colonial dynamics such as the spread of anti-LGBTQIA+ norms and legislation initiatives and the diffusion of hateful rhetoric and harmful policies. These strategies are part of an on-going conversation and struggle that is shared by activists across the continent and not only a response to the 2024 U.S. presidential elections. Yet, as the insights shared in this chapter show, the impact of these elections is wide-reaching and will possibly be felt even more strongly in the future than in the recent past.

51 Besong, Interview with Kevin D. Besong.