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Singapore Swing

The City's Gay Balancing Act

 By **CRIS PRYSTAY**
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SINGAPORE -- In a play about gay life in Singapore staged here last month, one character asks a homosexual-rights activist why a gay teacher had departed so quietly after being fired from a government school. He adds, "I thought the prime minister said they allow gays in the civil service." The rights activist replies: "That was 2003 -- and that was the ex-PM."


The point of the dialogue was that in real life, Singapore's leaders have sent mixed signals over the past five years on how the city-state would deal with its gay community -- on the one hand allowing such things as plays with homosexual themes, yet on the other hand keeping a law on the books that makes consensual sex between men a crime punishable by a prison sentence. And while various leaders have tried to play down that threat, the gay community remains uneasy.

During the first half of this decade, homosexuals in Singapore saw clear signs that attitudes were changing. In 2003, the then prime minister Goh Chok Tong said that homosexuals "are like you and me" and shouldn't face discrimination in Singapore's civil service. After his comments, the gay community flourished; about a dozen gay clubs, bars and saunas sprang up. The Nation party, an annual gay rave that began in 2001, soon grew into the region's biggest such party outside Sydney's Mardi Gras.

But Mr. Goh stepped aside in 2004 to make way for Lee Hsien Loong, the son of modern Singapore's founding father, Lee Kuan Yew. Mr. Goh was viewed as being more relaxed and liberal than the Lees. By 2005, a chill had set in. The junior minister for health stood up in Parliament and said the Nation party could be responsible for a rise in HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, in Singapore's gay community. The police that year denied Nation party-organizer Fridae.com, a company that also runs a gay Web site, a license to hold the annual rave because it was "contrary to public interest," according to a police statement issued at the time.

Then, in another apparent zag, the elder Mr. Lee, who is still a senior government member with the title of minister mentor, said in April that homosexuality is genetic, and "we should not go around like this moral police, barging into people's bedrooms. That's not our business." Later that month, Mr. Lee elaborated by stating that the law would eventually have to be changed to keep step with the rest of the world -- but not yet. "We are not going to allow Singapore to become the vanguard of

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Southeast Asia," he said. "We will follow the world. A few respectable steps behind."

Singapore's stop-and-go approach on gay rights reflects the balancing act between the leadership's desire to appeal to what it views as a deeply conservative society, and its bid to diversify the island-nation's economy away from its core manufacturing base and turn it into a modern, global metropolis. Singapore wants to position itself as a major finance, science and arts hub in the Asian-Pacific region; yet activists contend that gay foreign professionals -- including bankers and actors -- won't want to come if they could be branded as criminals, and some homosexual Singaporeans may opt to pursue their professions elsewhere. The city-state also wants to be seen as the kind of tolerant, vibrant, forward-thinking place that is attractive to professionals and entrepreneurs, regardless of their sexual preference, but, activists contend, its stance on gay sex sends a signal that it is a stilted environment.

The Talent Pool

Exactly what effect Singapore's stance toward gay people is having on its ability to attract and retain talent is hard to quantify. Certainly, Singapore is viewed as more tolerant toward homosexuality than its closest neighbors Malaysia and Indonesia, and it has an active gay community. Fridae.com maintains that of Singapore's total population of 4.5 million, about 400,000 are gay. But the city-state is considered to be less gay-friendly than Thailand, which became host to the Nation party in 2005 and 2006 after it was banned in Singapore. (The organizer has called the party off this year, saying that as a Singapore company it prefers to hold the event at home or not at all.)

"I've dealt with openly gay (job) candidates -- people working in banking, IT, finance, sales and marketing -- and it's never been an issue" in Singapore, says Mark Ellwood, managing director of recruitment company Robert Walters Singapore. "I don't remember anyone ever being prosecuted; it's in writing, but practically nothing ever happens," Mr. Ellwood adds.

Still, the specter of the law -- even if it isn't used -- is affecting some people's decision to work in Singapore. For instance, Fabien Ho, the creative director of Juniper Brands, an advertising and brand consultancy in the U.K., turned down an offer last year to move to Singapore from London to start up a branch. "It would have been a big pay rise and an amazing promotion," says Mr. Ho, 31 years old, but he felt he would have to go back into the closet in Singapore. Plus, like many countries, Singapore doesn't issue dependent visas to gay partners. That was the "real roadblock," says Mr. Ho, a French citizen whose father is Singaporean and mother French, and who lived in Singapore between the ages of 6 and 20. "I resented having to choose between (my) relationship and this great job in Singapore."

American Eric Feltin, co-founder of London-based Switchfire Ltd., a technology company that provides mobile-phone dating and chat services to companies catering to straight consumers, axed a plan to use Singapore as a base for the company's Asian expansion because he felt the antigay law was a sign of Singapore's restrictiveness.

In 2004, one of Mr. Feltin's business partners, who is straight, suggested the company set up an Asian branch in Singapore to develop a Chinese-language SMS dating product that could later be rolled out in China. Mr. Feltin, who is gay, made several trips to Singapore that year to check it out. "At first blush, it looked like a very good opportunity: Singapore was a market in its own right, it was also a stepping stone to China, and there were lots of good technology partners there with new applications we could take world-wide. But the more time I spent there, the more uneasy I got," he says now. "It's hard to define, but the anti-gay law contributed to my impression that it wouldn't be a good place to do business."

Michael King, a 58-year-old program manager at Cisco Systems Inc. in San Francisco, arrived in Singapore in 2002 to take on the role of operations manager for Asia, but he asked for a transfer after the first year. "I was completely out as a gay man in California, but when I got to Singapore I was extremely uncomfortable with being openly gay and felt forced back into the closet...and felt like a criminal whenever I socialized with gay friends," Mr. King says.

Singapore's stance also is causing it to lose out on the lucrative so-called pink-dollar travel market. According to a 2003 study by the Singapore Tourism Board, the three-day Nation party, which was held annually between 2001 and 2004, brought in an estimated US\$6 million a year in tourism revenue. The tourism body says it no longer tracks pink-dollar tourism.

Gay tourists like Dave Tussey, 59, a retired San Francisco police officer, says he and his partner of 18 years won't come to Singapore until the antigay law is changed. Mr. Tussey and his partner travel to Asia frequently for holidays, and have visited Thailand, Hong Kong and Laos in the past few years, spending thousands of dollars each trip on hotels, tours and food. But, Mr. Tussey says, "we won't go (to Singapore) until the politics change in our favor. I vote with my dollars."

Singapore is in the midst of overhauling its penal code, inherited from British colonial rulers, and some advocates see it as a prime opportunity to tackle the part that pertains to homosexuality. Section 377A of the code states that any male person who commits "gross indecency" with another male is subject to up to two years in prison. As part of the revamp, the government now proposes to ax a colonial-era law that deems oral sex between anyone, gay or straight, a crime, and legalize anal sex between consenting adult heterosexuals -- but not between gay men. Britain legalized consensual homosexual sex in 1967.

Many other Asian countries whose laws are modeled on British jurisprudence deem homosexual sex a crime, including Malaysia, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, according to a 2007 report by the Brussels-based International Gay and Lesbian Association. One Indonesian state, Aceh, that has a Shariah court system based on Islamic law, also outlaws gay sex among Muslims, the report says. Singapore's economic rival, Hong Kong, decriminalized gay sex in 1991, although the former British colony added a law that made buggery in public places a crime. Last month, however, Hong Kong's highest court acquitted two men convicted of having sex in a car and ruled that law unconstitutional.

Over the years, discussions within the Singapore government on gay rights have centered on the economic impact. "It's about creating a global city that's attractive to all kinds of talent as well as retaining the talent we have. It's about tolerance -- it's about creating a more inclusive society," says Gillian Koh, an analyst at the Institute of Policy Studies who specializes in the relationship between the state and civil society in Singapore.

As for the re-emergence of the current debate, "I speculate there are ministers in the cabinet who think" the law needs to be abolished soon, says Alex Au, founder of People Like Us, a gay activist group in Singapore. "I think they are trying to encourage a debate in order to get Singaporeans to think more progressively about the issue," adds Mr. Au, who says that in June, he was denied a permit to hold a photo exhibition of gay couples kissing because it promoted a homosexual lifestyle.

Meantime, the city-state's goal to become an arts hub remains at risk, contend members of Singapore's theater community. British actor Ian McKellen says he was horrified to learn about Singapore's antigay law when he arrived here last month to perform in the Royal Shakespeare Company's production of "King Lear."

"Had I known what the law was, I would have said to the Royal Shakespeare Company, 'What are

you doing sending me to a country that thinks my private behavior is a criminal activity?" Sir Ian, who is a gay activist in the U.K., said in an interview. "I think the RSC should make a disclaimer -- and they will the next time it happens, because the RSC has a policy of nondiscrimination among its employees. And in a sense, sending its employee to a country, where if they had sex, they would be breaking the law, is not a responsible thing for a company to do," he added.

Responding to Sir Ian's remarks, the Royal Shakespeare Company said in a statement that it is "committed to the safety and welfare of our staff wherever they may be in the world."

Playing Russian Roulette

In fact, the antisodomy law hasn't been used to prosecute adult men engaging in consensual sex in Singapore for many years. Still, "why have a law you don't want to enforce? Don't have it, otherwise it's like Russian roulette," says Glen Goei, a noted Singaporean director of theater and film who spent 18 years in London and moved back to Singapore five years ago. "You're pointing a gun to my head but saying I'm not going to use it. Please take away the gun," says Mr. Goei, who starred opposite Anthony Hopkins in the Tony award-winning play "M. Butterfly" in London in 1987; his hit film, "Forever Fever," premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 1999.

"When I came back, I thought, 'wow, it's very refreshing' because it was a different Singapore than I had left in the '80s, and I thought 'yes, there's a renaissance going on here and I'm accepted and appreciated: I can make this my home.' But suddenly I'm thinking 'wow, I'm not that welcome. Maybe I should think about leaving again.'"

Indeed, there is a steady drain of young gay Singaporean men who leave and never come home, Mr. Au says. That takes an economic toll that's difficult to measure, he adds.

One is Keo Lin. Mr. Lin, 25, applied for a government scholarship in 2004 to do a teaching degree at Singapore's National Institute of Education. He got the scholarship, which leads to a guaranteed job once the degree is complete. Mr. Lin, however, had second thoughts: Worried he would have to hide his sexual preference during his entire teaching career or risk getting sacked, he turned down the offer and enrolled in a bachelor of arts degree program at the University of Melbourne in Australia.

Mr. Lin kept his sexuality private while he was growing up, and when he told his mother in 2005, he says it broke her heart. He still plans to become a teacher, but not in Singapore, where he says his personal life would basically be against the law.

"There's this view, 'you've got your gay clubs, your gay saunas, and your plays are allowed to happen' -- but so what? This law is hanging there," says Ivan Heng, founder of Wild Rice, the theater company that last month staged "Happy Endings, Asian Boys Vol. 3," the play involving the firing of a gay teacher in Singapore. "The tide keeps coming in and going out for gay rights" in Singapore, adds Mr. Heng, who is gay. "We have to keep pushing."

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