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**Israel's Sharp Right Turn on Gays**

By: DOUG IRELAND  
06/14/2007

The Israeli parliament, the Knesset, last Wednesday, June 6, voted overwhelmingly in favor of a ban on all gay pride marches anywhere in Israel, and also for a law specifically designed to prevent the Jerusalem Gay Pride March scheduled for June 21.

Both bills were introduced by religious parties. Gay advocates said they hope two progressive Knesset committee chairs might yet block, the measures from coming to a third and final vote in the full parliament.

One Knesset bill, introduced by deputies from Shas - a hard-right conservative party representing ultra-Orthodox Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews - calls for a ban on gay pride parades throughout the country. This bill passed on first reading by 41-21.

The second bill - promoted as targeting Jerusalem Pride - amends the Basic Law on Jerusalem, the nation's capital, to "enable the Jerusalem municipal council to ban parades and rallies in town for 'considerations of disturbance to public order, offending the public's sensitivities, or for religious considerations,'" the Israeli news agency YNet reported. That measure, introduced by Eli Gabbai, a deputy from the right-wing National Religious Party, a Zionist faction associated with the Israeli settlers in the Occupied Territories, passed its first reading 40-23.

Gabbai told the Arutz Sheva news agency, "The holding of a Gay Pride parade in Jerusalem is offensive to the believers of all religions of the world. This law authorizes the City Council to ban an event that is liable to offend millions of believers around the world, as well as residents of this city itself."

A recent public opinion poll showed three-quarters of Jerusalem residents were opposed to holding a Pride March in the city.

Jerusalem's 39-member City Council is currently controlled by religious parties, and the city has been led since 2003 by ultra-Orthodox Mayor Uri Lupoliansky. Pride organizers have repeatedly been forced to resort to court action to uphold their right to march.

There is one openly gay member of the Jerusalem City Council, Saar Netanel of the left-wing Meretz Party. Netanel said the Jerusalem Pride March would take place next week despite the Knesset vote. So did Noa Sattath, chair of the Jerusalem Open House for Peace and Tolerance, the city's LGBT community center, which is the principal organizer of the Pride March.

Following the vote to pass the two bills, Sattath called the legislation "dangerous," and said it "could damage the bedrock of Israel's democratic principles because of narrow political interests. We will continue to fight it in parliament and through the Gay Pride Parade... I feel that we and democracy in general are being harassed."

"The Pride Parade is an expression of our coming out of the closet," Sattath declared. "An attempt to prevent it is actually an attempt to shove us back into the closet."

Last November, a planned Pride March in Jerusalem was cancelled by police following two weeks of violent, anti-gay rioting in protest against it by ultra-Orthodox Jews. Instead, a Pride rally was held in a soccer stadium.

This year, Jerusalem Pride "will by no means be confined to a stadium," Yoav Sivan, a prominent gay activist and journalist who is a board member of both Jerusalem Open House and of Aguda, the national LGBT association, told Gay City News. "It is of the utmost importance to us to march in downtown Jerusalem, and a huge closet is out of the question."

The Meretz Party bloc in the Knesset was the only parliamentary group to vigorously oppose both bills. Only nine of the Knesset's 19 Labor Party members voted against the legislation. Labor is a member of the ruling coalition headed by Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, leader of the Kadima Party founded by Ariel Sharon.

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Olmert, who has an open lesbian daughter, issued a statement saying that he does "not think that Jerusalem is the appropriate location for holding gay pride parades due to the special sensitive nature of the city."

"According to the ruling coalition's agreement, all parties in the coalition must agree to any changes in Basic Laws," like the one governing Jerusalem, Sivan told Gay City News. And the gay activist was outraged that Labor did not exercise its veto power over the second anti-gay bill targeting Jerusalem Pride.

"It's a scandalous bill," Sivan said, "saying that a mayor and the Council could decide who could take to the street! Labor was very negligent, to say the least. A few of Labor's more progressive figures have spoken in favor of the Jerusalem Pride March, most notably Knesset Member Sheli Yechimovitz, who represents the pro-gay part of Labor-but those forces could not get the party to exercise its veto."

Another Knesset member vigorously opposing the anti-gay legislation was Dov Hanin from Hadash, the Communist party, "who has consistently been very supportive of gay rights and even spoke at last year's Pride event, although the problem is that his Arab colleagues in the Hadash Party have kept silent," Sivan said.

The head of the Meretz bloc in the Knesset, Zahava Gal-On, said in response to the vote on the two bills, "The government has revealed the extent of its ineptness by allowing the coalition members to vote freely, banning the Gay Parade in Jerusalem and thereby denying the gay community's freedom of expression."

She added, "A double-sided sword has been turned toward the community. The Knesset is crazy, with a crazy government where the tyranny of the majority is more important than human rights."

Israel's new president-elect, Shimon Peres, 83, a Nobel Peace Prize laureate chosen on June 13, who aggressively courted the religious parties in his campaign, not only issued a statement opposing the Jerusalem Pride Parade, but, Sivan said, he did so "in the home of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, the spiritual leader of the Shas Party [sponsor of the bill banning Pride marches nationwide] and the former chief rabbi of Israel, whose anti-gay incitements extend to calls for violence, and who calls gays 'evil and abominable.'"

Sivan believes that the refusal of Labor to exercise its veto on the bill allowing Jerusalem to ban the Pride March was a maneuver designed to help Peres' candidacy for president against the conservative Likud Party candidate.

"Labor's representative to the coalition government's Ministerial Committee on Legislation, Welfare Minister Yitzhak Herzog, conveniently chose not to show up, twice, to the committee's discussions on the two bills. If the coalition agreement had been enforced" against the anti-gay legislation, Sivan told this reporter, "this would have put Labor and Shas in a head-to-head confrontation and threatened to jeopardize Peres' chances, which heavily depended on Shas."

Peres received the votes of all 12 Shas Knesset members on the first of two ballots for president. Although Peres left the Labor Party - in which he had spent a lifetime - two years ago to join Kadima, in the small, incestuous world of Israeli politics Peres still has many friends in Labor. And Labor's official nominee, Colette Avital, withdrew her candidacy and endorsed Peres after his strong showing on the first ballot.

The two anti-gay bills must pass three readings before becoming law. Sivan said that "both bills will now be debated in one of two parliamentary committees which are chaired by two relatively progressive MPs," and that he believes "they'll bury the bills in the committee." Meanwhile, Jerusalem religious leaders are planning a series of actions designed to prevent the Pride Parade from taking place in the city. A Committee to Stop the Abomination Parade - which has the support of the Yesha Rabbinical Council (from Judea, Samaria, and Gaza), the Sanhedrin (a council of Orthodox Jewish scholars and religious judges), and Orthodox members of the Jerusalem City Council - this week asked for a police permit for what it calls "a demonstration by half a million people" at the entrance to Jerusalem on June 21, the same day as the Pride March.

"If there is a demonstration by hundreds of thousands [against the Pride March], the possibility of holding [it] in Jerusalem will be erased," the committee said.

The group also said a donor has already agreed to pay for 1,000 buses to bring anti-gay demonstrators from all over the country. The Orthodox event will be segregated by gender - women will congregate at the beginning of Herzl Boulevard, while men will occupy the road leading to Ramot.

The anti-gay committee this week also began distributing posters calling on people to "forcefully resist" the Pride Parade that will "defile the holy city."

The posters bear the signatures of prominent rabbis from different streams within Orthodox Judaism, including Rabbi Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, former Sephardic Chief Rabbi Mordechai Elyahu, former Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi Avraham Shapira, and many more.

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On June 10, the Yesha Rabbinical Council issued a written statement against the Pride March, saying, "The idea of renewing the Gay Pride event is an existential threat to the People of Israel. Every soul is filled with dread in the face of the repeated intention of defiling Jerusalem in a provocative way, through use of impurities."

After a meeting with police commanders last Sunday, Jerusalem Open House organizers said they had been promised "large-scale security" to prevent a repeat of last year's anti-gay violence by Orthodox Jews. In 2005, an Orthodox man stabbed three participants in a Jerusalem Pride event.

Hagai Eyad, an openly gay journalist with the Tel Aviv edition of Time Out magazine, late last month announced the formation of a gay political party to be called Magi, a Hebrew acronym for Gay Party in Israel. Sivan called Eyad "a nice guy," but added, "I'm not familiar with any consultation with gay organizations and associations" before he formed his party with a few friends.

"I haven't heard of anyone who takes them seriously," Sivan said. "I doubt if they can even get the minimum two-and-a-half percent of the vote" necessary to qualify as a legally recognized party.

*Doug Ireland can be reached through his blog, DIRELAND, at <http://direland.typepad.com/direland/>.*

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