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Cuba's LGBT Community Gains Visibility and Hopes for Legalization of Civil Unions

by Daniel Vázquez

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A Cuban lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) community-activist group led by psychologist Mariela Castro Espín, daughter of President Raúl Castro, continues to gain notoriety in the press and on the street. Its agenda includes eradicating homophobia and winning the right to civil unions for same-sex couples.

Castro Espín, director of the Centro Nacional de Educación Sexual (CENESEX), is contributing to opening the debate on homosexuality in a society that in the 1960s went through some bitter episodes of segregating homosexuals as well as sending them to labor camps run by the military.

CENESEX managed to obtain Cuban Ministerio de Salud approval in June 2008 for a resolution permitting the resumption of sex-change operations in Cuba, which were interrupted in 1988 after the first surgery. Since 2008, sex-change surgeries have been performed on 26 transsexuals. These drew a lot of attention since treatments for transsexuals are free.

The public debate on the Cuban gay community’s rights has not been without controversies. It reveals the prejudices of a male-dominated society, resistance by the Catholic Church, and discontent of citizens who do not identify with CENESEX’s politics directed by the niece of former President Fidel Castro.

Civil unions

Government policy on civil unions will be discussed during a Partido Comunista de Cuba (PCC) conference in January 2012. The primary purpose of the conference is to analyze the progress of the reforms passed in April at the Sixth Congress of the PCC, through which Raúl Castro intends to update" the country’s economic model.

The sign of approval must come from the PCC before the national parliament can act. The reform project, says Castro Espín, which has been waiting for three years for approval, includes civil unions for homosexuals in the Family Code (part of the Civil Code, which establishes the legal framework for family relations in Cuba).

CENESEX specialists have tracked the process for approving civil unions and same-sex marriage in Spain and Latin American countries (Mexico and Argentina), where, as in Cuba, they noted the Catholic Church’s dissatisfaction with the use of the term "marriage" as well as opposition to sex-change operations for transgender people.

"There are issues where we can give. We can say—OK, we will not talk about marriage but about another variant that includes the same rights. We will talk of legal unions or registered partnerships, which are nothing other than marriage as a concept," Castro Espín said on a recent visit to Spain.

Fidel Castro’s niece has called for an end to the PCC’s discrimination against homosexuals. At the same time, she emphasized that homosexuals "can now enter military service, declared or
undeclared," although no legislation exists in that respect. "It is that way in practice, and it will be legislated," she told the Spanish press.

The crusade for gay rights on the island includes debates in the official press, open forums, and conferences. There are more references to homosexuality in Cuban television dramas as well as marches through central Havana by CENESEX activists carrying colorful banners against homophobia.

One of CENESEX’s points of reference is the Dutch model that promotes the use of contraceptives and condoms and sex education in schools from an early age. Results show that the Netherlands has among the lowest rates of teen pregnancy, sexually transmitted disease, and abortion in the world.

Cuban state policy mandated sex education in 1975, but, according to Castro Espín, this was not actually achieved until 1996, and still contradictions persist. "Prejudices are still very strongly rooted in our culture and in our history as a nation," she told the local press.

Castro Espín is the daughter of the late Vilma Espín, who was the longtime president of the Federación de Mujeres Cubanas (FMC) and who served as first lady. Castro Espín rejected rumors that she is interested in future political office, despite her current public visibility and her growing role in international conferences.

An LGBT observatory

This year the Observatorio Cubano de los Derechos de la Comunidad LGBT appeared on the island, an independent organization that aims to promote and protect the rights of the community in accordance with rules and procedures recognized by the UN.

Its activists say that they have worked in sexual-education efforts since 2007 and have decided to become a watch group for complaints of official discrimination suffered by homosexuals. Its director Leannes Imbert said that they plan to show that a much larger LGBT community exists than purported by Castro Espín and regrets CENESEX's accusations that they have political interests.

Imbert participated in the March meeting with former US President Jimmy Carter, civil-society leaders, and dissidents in Havana. The US is planning to spend approximately US$300,000 this year to help the LGBT community in Cuba, according to the US State Department’s Web site.

Among the Observatorio’s goals are to create an audit committee on institutionalized homophobia and to modify laws that affect the LGBT community. So far, the new organization lacks sufficient financial resources to launch a labor as comprehensive as that undertaken by CENESEX.

Imbert said that they would appeal to the country’s authorities "as the main channel for solving conflicts" that affect the LGBT community but that they do not rule out appeals to international institutions if they do not receive answers from the government.

The Observatorio held a march June 28 in Havana, marking the first celebration of Gay Pride Day in Cuba. A dozen participants gathered and completed their demonstration without confrontation with the police. These processions through Cuban streets by gay activists with colorful banners would have been unimaginable a decade ago.
Turning the page on homophobia

The public debate on the LGBT community in Cuba has led to further airing of the Cuban communist government policy about homosexuals. Government officials have acknowledged that in the 1960s and 1970s they committed acts of discrimination.

Speaking to the Mexican press in August 2010, Fidel Castro blamed himself for the persecution of homosexuals on the island during the years after he assumed power in 1959. "Yes, there were moments of great injustice, whoever was responsible. If it was us, it was us. I am trying to define my responsibility in all of that, because after all, personally, I have no such prejudices," said the former leader.

During the "gray period" in Cuba from 1970 to 1975, political dogma led to the ostracism of a group of notable artists and intellectuals because of their homosexuality, then considered a condition that prevented them from being genuinely "revolutionary." Today the work of these intellectuals, among them the deceased writers José Lezama Lima and Virgilio Piñera, is again valued and published.

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