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Costa Rica’s "Invisibles" Debut with Massive March and Washing Façade of Congressional Headquarters

by George Rodríguez
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Some 3,000 "invisible" Costa Ricans debuted as a movement, peacefully and energetically marching down several of the capital’s main avenues and streets to support human rights and demand social reform.

Participants came from a host of civil-society organizations, mainly of the country’s gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex (GLBTI) community, thus providing the core of slogans, chants, and phrases on banners and signs in the march characterized by colorful floats, creative costumes, and cheerful music.

The GLBTI population makes up about 500,000 of this Central American nation’s approximately 4.3 million people.

The main demands heard during the parade related to respect for this sector of the population’s rights as well as strong rejection of evangelical Deputy Justo Orozco, elected last month to head the Human Rights Committee of the unicameral Asamblea Legislativa (AL).

Orozco’s staunch anti-gay position has earned him unwavering rejection from the GLBTI community, who consider him a homophobic politician. Orozco, a pastor who owns a private university where he graduated, is the only legislator for the evangelical Partido Renovación Costarricense (RN), one of two such political organizations in the Asamblea.

Orozco’s election on May 31 as president of the Human Rights Committee by the group’s pro-government majority of which Orozco is an ally triggered massive opposition from the local civil society in general and the GLBTI community in particular. He opposes not only recognizing rights of same-sex couples, since he considers homosexuality to be "an abomination," but in vitro fertilization as well.

During the first session presided by Orozco—who is pointed out as someone with contradictory opinions—the committee voted against a bill on same-sex couples’ rights. In an interview published two days after his election as head of the committee, he vividly explained why he "fiercely" opposes homosexual couples, saying, "I consider the penis is created for the blessing of having children and not for it to enter an anus."

"You’ve seen children being made fun of because they have large ears or are fat. Can you imagine a child in school being made fun of because he or she has two fathers or two mothers, when the majority have a mother and a father?" Orozco asked the journalist interviewing him. "It is antbiblical, and it does not work."

Nevertheless, the controversial legislator said, "Of course we believe in opportunities for homosexuals. I’m willing to listen to them and talk."
Referring to the university he owns and where he teaches mathematics, Orozco recalled that "I had a student who declared himself a homosexual, and we treated him with wisdom and love...he graduated, we didn’t bother him."

Asked why same-sex couples should be denied their rights, Orozco answered, "For fear of God. I don’t want Costa Rica to be a Sodom and Gomorrah. I want a country of peace and opportunity. With equal opportunities for all. That’s my mission here in the Asamblea."

Rejecting the strong criticism launched against him for his views, Orozco told La Prensa Libre, "I’m an academic, and I also have studies in mathematics and law. What happens is that people don’t know me. The press has wrongly reported on me, and people believe that." He insisted that he is capable of reaching consensus with sectors doubting his capability, because "I have the capability, and also I am a moderate person who seeks peace, promotes justice, and I have very clear positions."

**Social networks instrumental in creating organization**

Giovanni Delgado, a leader of the Movimiento Diversidad (MD), which defends the rights of the GLBTI community, told NotiCen that "for a whole month, different movements got together and we created the movement that’s called Los Invisibles." It includes "all people nationwide whose human rights are being violated, and we demand social reform from the government," he added.

On the Marcha de Los Invisibles, Delgado said it was organized through Facebook and Twitter, adding, "It is the first time in Costa Rica such an important movement comes from social networks, and in fact it’s the largest march seen, at this moment, in Costa Rica, on human rights."

Delgado explained that the organizers proposed, "as a symbolic act, to wash the Asamblea," because "the Asamblea is corrupt, and we want to point it out and have the whole world see... the government needs washing." The MD leader referred to the action, once the march arrived at congressional headquarters, in which several leaders and other participants threw powdered soap and water on one of the outside walls and scrubbed it for several minutes.

Delgado also said "the idea is to keep organizing marches, keep calling on people...until there’s more rights for in vitro fertilization, women, same-sex couples."

Opposition center-left Partido Acción Ciudadana (PAC) Deputy Carmen Muñoz told NotiCen that the Movimiento de los Invisibles "brings together many Costa Rican men and women, even beyond" the GLBTI community. "This movement is aimed at telling the president [Laura Chinchilla] that human rights should be a priority for her administration as well."

Carlos Góngora, who heads the opposition rightist Movimiento Libertario (ML) bloc in the Asamblea and who also took part in the march, warned about what he described as Costa Rica’s "double discourse to the world."

"On the one hand, we’re telling international fora that we uphold human rights, and on the other the committee of shame [the congressional Human Rights Committee] rejected, through the majority of its members, to discuss the bill on same-sex couples, which we’ve again presented," he told NotiCen. "Deputy Carmen Muñoz, Deputy José María Villalta [the only opposition leftist Frente Amplio legislator], and myself again presented the initiative. We’re not going to give up."

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"But we must not divert attention, either," said Góngora. "I think that those who are invisible, but trampling on human rights, are the government and the [ruling social democratic] Partido Liberación Nacional (PLN). Because it's very easy to blame Deputy Justo Orozco for the bills not being passed, when, on human rights, the government and the PLN have to give clear explanations not only to the [GLBTI] community but also to indigenous groups and women’s groups, where there is an absence of a human rights policy."

**Administration changing course**

Administration officials and GLBTI leaders met last month and the former expressed the government’s commitment to back same-sex couples’ rights.

After the talks, held June 20 at the Casa Presidencial—government headquarters—Minister of the Presidency Carlos Ricardo Benavides, a former PLN deputy, told reporters that "this is a meeting that has nothing to do with one particular project. It has to do with the Casa Presidencial’s position to clearly tell [the GLBTI community] that we support recognizing civil and patrimonial rights."

Among others, those rights include homosexual couples' ability to register as such with the Caja Costarricense de Seguro Social, partners' right to visit each other at hospitals and to inherit property and other assets, as human rights organizations and GLBTI leaders point out.

The following morning, MD president Marco Castillo told the local Radio AND that the officials "told us the president’s discourse was going to change, in the sense of backing us, which is an improvement. It's not that the outlook has changed dramatically, but the government committed itself to supporting homosexual couples’ rights, and that is a small change in itself. In one month, we'll be talking with the minister of the presidency to see if they back the bills as they are...or if they plan to make any changes."

"What we ask the presidency is to make a public statement saying it agrees [to back the bills], so the Partido Liberación legislators who haven’t made up their minds yet take that into account when casting their votes," said Castillo, a Costa Rican lawyer.

One of the bills—on same-sex couples’ rights—was turned down in the first Human Rights Committee meeting headed by Orozco and presented again by the minority legislators.

The other, which is being analyzed by the Legal Affairs Committee, aims at reforming article 242 of the Family Code, which refers to couples and defines them as bonds between a man and a woman, by changing the wording "a man and a woman" to "persons."

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