



The Council for Global Equality

Advancing LGBTQI+ Inclusion in U.S. Foreign Policy

GLOBAL EQUALITY TODAY — MARCH 2024

As we write here in Washington, D.C., spring has arrived. Clocks have sprung forward, cherry blossoms have just peaked, and pollen allergies are back with a vengeance.

Temperatures aren't the only thing heating up, though. While it's only March, we're effectively moving onto the general election season months before the summer conventions following barely contested primary races in both major parties.

Any election year offers distinct advocacy challenges, but never have we seen one so fraught as this year, where Congress is paralyzed by the extraordinary dysfunction within the House Republican majority. One example of the extremist-driven paralysis comes in the continuing failure to pass a five-year "clean" reauthorization of [PEPFAR](#), despite the program's extraordinary success and its twenty-year record of bipartisan support. Fortunately, Congress did just approve a clean, one-year extension of the program in its late-night budget deal. That's not ideal for program management, but we did manage to **keep some dangerous riders out of PEPFAR that would have undermined its effectiveness — and its ability to serve LGBTQI+ communities abroad.**

But we continue to work with our allies in the executive branch and on the Hill to promote LGBTQI+ human rights wherever possible. Just this month, CGE members successfully lobbied Congressional allies to [strip more than 50 anti-LGBTQI+ riders from the Appropriations bill](#). The anti-LGBTQI+ forces in Congress did manage to attach one unfortunate provision that is intended to prevent embassies from flying Pride flags during Pride celebrations overseas. But CGE member Human Rights Campaign summed up the situation well, noting in a [press release](#) that it was one of the least-harmful of all of the anti-LGBTQI+ provisions and that it does not in any way prevent embassies from actually celebrating Pride.

Indeed, with this new limitation, we challenge the majority of U.S. embassies that do celebrate Pride around the world to rethink their celebrations to move beyond flag-waving events to gatherings designed to honor and support the community in creative new ways. For its part, a [White House statement](#) promised to work with Congress to repeal the policy. CGE and our members will remain vigilant, as no doubt, hard-right members of Congress will continue to try inserting anti-LGBTQI+ poison pills into other bills as this increasingly dysfunctional Congress wraps up its pre-election agenda.

PROJECT 2025, LGBTQI+ HUMAN RIGHTS, AND THE AUTHORITARIAN THREAT

It is no exaggeration to say that democracy is on the ballot in 2024, in the United States and around the world. Two billion people — [about half of the world's adult population](#) — will go to the polls this year. Maria Ressa, the Nobel Peace Prize-winning journalist from the Philippines and author of [How To Stand Up to a Dictator](#), has warned that in all likelihood, ["2024 will be the year that democracy falls off the cliff."](#)

Very dramatic words to be sure, but in Indonesia, a former general once banned from the United States for alleged human rights abuses has already won the February presidential election. In Russia, Vladimir Putin used sham polls to further tighten his grasp on power. In India, Narendra Modi, the Hindu nationalist prime minister, is widely expected to win a third term in this spring's elections. Other key elections coming this year include those taking place in Mexico, South Africa, South Korea, Belgium, Ghana, the European Union, and, potentially, the United Kingdom.

In an op-ed last month, Maria Sjödin, Executive Director of Outright, one of CGE's member organizations, outlined the implications of these elections for LGBTQI+ people, noting the [weaponization of homophobia and transphobia](#) in the campaigns in Russia, Ghana, and South Africa, among other countries.

This weaponization is, of course, front and center in this year's U.S. presidential, Congressional, and local elections. At CGE, we are working hard to draw attention to **Project 2025**.

If you haven't yet heard, Project 2025 is what the Heritage Foundation and its partners are innocuously pitching as "the plan for the next conservative President" of the United States. But as our colleagues at the Global Project Against Hate and Extremism [explain](#) far more accurately, **"Project 2025 is an authoritarian roadmap to dismantling a thriving, inclusive democracy for all."**

We *strongly* encourage you to read our [blog on Project 2025](#), and to share it, along with [our fact sheet](#) on the particular anti-LGBTQI+ planks of the plan. Additionally, check out Beirne Roose-Snyder, CGE's Senior Policy Fellow, talking about **Project 2025** on the rePROs Fight Back [podcast](#).

Beyond demonizing LGBTQI+ people and looking to eliminate the fundamental human rights of the community, Project 2025 takes aim at numerous rights, populations, programs, and principles: sexual and reproductive health and rights, racial equity, climate justice and environmental policy, public education, so-called “wokeness” in the military, separation of church and state, and much more.

Let's not mince words: **Project 2025's targeting of LGBTQI+ people and of sexual and reproductive health and rights is *inseparable* from its overarching goal of dismantling democracy and capturing the U.S. federal government.** It is no exaggeration to describe Project 2025's mandate as *eliminationist*, as it seeks to erase LGBTQI+ people from public life, from social protections, and from democratic citizenship altogether.

The Republican House majority has certainly demonstrated its willingness to pursue such an eliminationist agenda, as have anti-LGBTQI+ state legislators around the country. The one partial victory they achieved in the appropriations battle was enacting a ban on flying the rainbow flag on the exterior of U.S. embassies — though, as already noted, that measure does not limit embassies organizing Pride events or otherwise supporting in-country LGBTQI+ communities. But this provision also speaks to how authoritarians, at home and around the globe, have [weaponized the rainbow flag in their war on democracy and the rule of law](#).

Over the months to come, we'll have much, much more to say about Project 2025 and about the highly coordinated, very well-funded anti-rights movement that is targeting LGBTQI+ rights as a wedge for its broader assault on democracy, civil society, and human rights.

LGBTQI+ REFUGEES & ASYLUM SEEKERS

In February, House Republicans defeated the **border security deal** negotiated between the White House and a bipartisan group of Senators. While there were certainly some positive measures in the deal, from increased staffing to process asylum claims to urgently needed **assistance for Ukraine**, and while House Republicans rejected the deal for not being sufficiently anti-immigrant, we expressed our fundamental opposition to any changes to immigration policy that would undermine the basic human right to seek asylum and that certainly would be [disastrous for LGBTQI+ refugees and asylum seekers](#).

We want to flag two related pieces from CGE members. First, in an [op-ed](#) in *The Advocate*, Immigration Equality issued its own powerful rebuke to the deal, explaining why it would be lethal for LGBTQI+ asylum seekers. Second, Human Rights First [reported](#) on a trip to the U.S.-

Mexico border, sharing the stories of refugees directly harmed by U.S. policies, including that of an **LGBTQ+ refugee from Ghana** terrified of being forced to return — and this was even before the passage of the [horrific anti-LGBTQ+ law](#) by the Ghanaian Parliament in late February.

LGBTQ+ HUMAN RIGHTS UNDER THREAT AROUND THE WORLD

Ghana is one of all too many countries where homophobic and transphobic politicians, backed by anti-rights actors from the United States, are pushing discriminatory, hate-fueled legislation to deny even the most basic rights of citizenship to LGBTQ+ people. These laws, whether proposed or actually passed and enacted, all increase anti-LGBTQ+ stigma and violence.

CGE is coordinating closely with activists in **Ghana** urging President Akufo-Addo to veto the draconian [bill](#) passed by Parliament in February; with movement leaders in **Uganda** petitioning for the Supreme Court there to [overturn](#) last year's [Anti-Homosexuality Act](#); and with advocates in [Kenya](#) and elsewhere in Africa working hard to prevent passage of similar bills in their own country.

We also continue to lobby our partners in the U.S. government, at the World Bank, and in like-minded countries to keep up the pressure and not let homophobic and transphobic politicians think they can get away with restricting the fundamental human rights of a vulnerable community. CGE especially appreciates the [termination of Uganda's AGOA status](#) and calls for Ghana's status to be revoked as well should the new law go into effect. We were also very pleased to see the Treasury Department levy [sanctions](#) against the director of Uganda's prison system:

"Members of vulnerable groups, including government critics and members of Uganda's LGBTQ+ community, have been beaten and held without access to legal counsel; for example, in a 2020 case, the UPS [Uganda Prisons Systems] denied a group of LGBTQ+ persons access to their lawyers and members of the group reportedly endured physical abuse, including a forced anal examination and scalding."

This is only the second-known use of [Global Magnitsky Act sanctions against a perpetrator for committing human rights violations against LGBTQ+ people](#), a strategy CGE has long urged Treasury to deploy. We likewise applaud the [denial of a visa to Ugandan MP Sarah Opendi](#) (and apparently to many other Ugandan MPs), who called for the castration of gay men and who has been one of the leading supporters of the Anti-Homosexuality Act.

For a deeper dive into the homophobic and transphobic campaigns across the Continent, we encourage you to read our think piece, ["Ubuntu for LGBTQ+ Africans,"](#) which argues:

The proliferation of anti-LGBTQ+ laws in Africa constitutes a perilous trend that imperils the lives and freedoms of countless individuals, placing the continent at a disadvantage. These laws contravene fundamental human rights principles, while also undermining democracy and the rule of law. It is imperative that African governments take decisive action to repeal

these harmful and discriminatory laws while actively promoting equality and human rights for all.

Meanwhile, **Russia** continues to push the template for authoritarian regimes using eliminationist tactics as a tool promote the broader suppression of dissent and independent civil society. Building upon the 2013 and 2022 so-called "[propaganda laws](#)", the Russian Supreme Court declared "the international LGBT movement" to be "[an extremist organization](#)," thus conflating any pro-LGBTQI+ statements with terrorism. Already, one woman has been jailed for wearing [rainbow earrings](#) under the new court ruling, and earlier in March, two employees of a gay bar were [charged with "extremism" for organizing and hosting drag shows](#). CGE is continuing to partner with Russian LGBTQI+ activists to draw attention to the crisis facing the country's queer community, and we are urging U.S. government partners to use all tools possible to prevent copycat legislation in other countries as was the case for the "propaganda" laws.

In **Central Asia**, the Biden Administration is seeking to develop closer security partnerships and economic relationships with the five former Soviet republics strategically located between Russia, China, and Afghanistan. As it does so, we continue to press our Administration partners to insist that [improving the abysmal situation for LGBTQI+ people and for human rights and civil society more broadly in Central Asia](#) *must* go hand-in-hand with closer trade ties.

THE WAR IN GAZA AND ISRAEL

More than five months since the catastrophic attacks of October 7th, CGE continues to mourn the pain and suffering from those brutally victimized by Hamas, as well as the Palestinian civilians who have been harmed and killed in the Israeli response. We call out all attacks on civilian populations as grave violations of human rights and humanitarian law.

We further call on the U.S. government to support an [immediate ceasefire in Gaza and Israel](#), and to support sufficient and unhindered humanitarian corridors to Gaza to prevent greater harm to civilians. We urge the United States to ensure that U.S. military and financial support are not used for the collective, retaliatory punishment of Palestinians, including journalists, children, and other vulnerable groups. We also call on the U.S. government to work for a negotiated release of all the hostages currently in Gaza as an immediate priority.

CGE Co-Chair Julie Dorf published her own personal [reflections on the war](#), having grown up in a "staunchly Zionist environment," visiting Israel and Palestine numerous times, and wrestling over the years with anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, pinkwashing, war and oppression, and what justice can look like. We likewise encourage you to share her essay and offer your own observations.

EMBASSY GUIDE

In our fall 2023 newsletter, we spotlighted the updated and expanded edition of CGE's [*Accessing U.S. Embassies: A Guide for LGBTQ+ Human Rights Defenders*](#), our resource for helping international partners understand and access U.S. embassies and missions and build and maintain productive working relationships with U.S. diplomatic and development staff around the world. This [guide](#), originally released in English in June, is now also available in [Spanish, French, and Arabic](#) as well.

CELEBRATING OUR PARTNERS

To wind down on a happy note: we've just celebrated [some amazing LGBTQ+ activists for International Women's Day](#), and we're preparing to recognize equally remarkable trans and nonbinary advocates for **Transgender Day of Visibility** later this week.

While the forces pitted against equality and human rights for LGBTQ+ communities are growing stronger and more connected in many regions of the world, we also saw two heartwarming victories for marriage equality in Japan earlier this month. And as CGE member organization [Amnesty International noted](#), "[b]y recognizing that the government's ban on same-sex marriage is unconstitutional, these rulings make clear that such discrimination has no place in Japanese society." Equality, too, is on the march and discrimination has no place in any society, we just have to remember to look for it and celebrate it, even as we fight back against the forces of hate and extremism.